

# Obama, FAA, and the Portsmouth Yardmaster

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What the Obama administration apparently did with the Federal Aviation Administration, in response to “sequester” (none of us knows the full story) is familiar from the old railroad industry playbook. But unlike the federal government, railroads have been reining in costs, and adjusting workforce(s), for many, many years.

The recent political panic induced by furloughing a few air traffic controllers brings to mind a similar tactic, down at the bottom of the food chain, many years ago. The decree had come down from on high to cut some jobs in response to a cyclical decline in freight traffic (former SAL R.R.). The division superintendent sent word to the general yardmaster (“GYM”) at Portsmouth, VA to take appropriate action. The GYM delayed, and delayed. Finally, the *super* called Portsmouth and demanded at least one clerical position be eliminated. Whereupon, the GYM abolished the most critical clerical job he could think of, the interchange clerk. Without a “paper” interchange of freight cars in the days before computers, everything would grind to a halt. Worse yet, interline financial settlements of revenue would stop- -the worst possible outcome!

No one questions the importance of a safe and efficient aviation system, but those of us who have some familiarity with the less-glamorous world of railroading are prone to wonder whether there are more important issues here than just the political actions attributed to the White House? Why is it more critical to staff lonely towers in Wyoming or Kansas than to fund far more critical transportation infrastructure at the core of the air traffic control system? Some of those ghost airports apparently have little or no regularly-scheduled commercial aviation traffic. After all, we are given to believe that ticket-purchasing air travelers pay far more, *proportionately*, into the aviation trust fund than do general aviation’s private jet owners and operators. But who has the greater political clout? Isn’t it time to shake up the system instead of a knee-jerk response?

And speaking of paying the bill, we noted in a recent WSJ editorial “Flying the Government Skies” (April 24) that: “*flyers directly fund two-thirds of the FAA budget*”. [about \$15 B. total]. Where does the remaining third come from? A: the general fund. So much for a user-fee-sustained transportation system. The WSJ editorial also stated that the number of flights has dropped 23% (which flights, and since when, was not made clear?). We sure don’t know the answers to all these questions, but in the lowly world of railroading, a 23% drop in the number of units of anything

handled would set off alarm bells that would result in a reduction of costs. And that includes much-maligned quasi-public Amtrak. The whole subject deserves a more rational response.

We are great admirers of aviation, dating back to the days of Eastern Airlines' DC-3's, and we are absolutely dazzled by the international reach of commercial aviation today. But let's not kid ourselves, commercial aviation has been supported by the taxpayers all the way, and still is. That is true of all modes of transportation, not just passenger rail (Amtrak), which receives the least funding and the most carping. # # # #. # #.