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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

**GOING ONCE . . . GOING TWICE . . . SOLD!
TO THE LOWEST BIDDER**

**Save our Nation's Air Traffic Control System
VOTE NO on H.R. 2115 - the FAA Conference Report**

September 4, 2003

Dear Colleague:

Despite strong House and Senate support for a provision **banning privatization** of the FAA's air traffic control system, the FAA Conference Report provides a roadmap to **sell off the ATC** system to the lowest bidder! The FAA Conference Report authorizes the FAA to immediately contract with private industry to operate control towers at 69 airports, which includes the 8th busiest tower in the country, and six other towers among the busiest 50! Significantly, the Alaska delegation protected two of their State's towers that were on the original list against privatization. The privatization language was inserted in the FAA Conference Report with minimal debate, despite the fact that there is no existing successful model for private air traffic control. In fact, current private systems have been found to be more costly, less efficient, and less productive than the U.S. system.

The *Boston Globe* has it right: **for-profit safety** should not be inflicted on the rest of the United States while Alaska protects its own!

Sincerely,

PETER DeFAZIO
Ranking Democratic Member
Aviation Subcommittee

THE BOSTON GLOBE

THOMAS OLIPHANT
Muscling government out of air safety

By Thomas Oliphant, 9/3/2003

WASHINGTON

IN THE EXPANDING annals of President Bush's duplicitous misleadership, turning high school civics on its head in the service of corporate buddies is at least a new wrinkle. I seem to remember a distant summer school's worth of

the civics stuff, along with a riveting course in driver's ed, in which I was taught that on Topic X, if the Senate passes A and the House passes B, they get together to resolve their differences in a conference committee, at which point the president decides to sign or veto the result.

Of course, my summer school long ago was in California, so maybe I got it wrong, but imagine my surprise to discover that late last month the Senate actually did pass A, the House actually did pass B, but they then got together to do the exact opposite of what each had already done, all under the veto-threatening gaze of President Bush. A final confrontation could come any time now that Congress is back.

The topic was an ideological favorite of Bush's -- turning governmental functions over to private, for-profit interests. In this case, it was a significant chunk of the country's air traffic control system. On one level, this is an interesting debate topic -- on which I happen to be a passionate believer in the odd notion that government should perform functions relating to public safety and health -- but what should fascinate everybody is how President Bush chooses to do his business.

He could not prevail if the privatization issue were put to a specific vote in Congress. In fact it was put to a vote in the Senate two months ago as part of the process of reauthorizing the functions of the aviation-supervising Federal Aviation Administration. With 11 Republicans joining in, the Senate in a 56-41 vote specifically forbade any privatization. In the House, a ban of only marginally less sweeping nature was made part of the legislation it approved.

But when representatives of the two bodies met to iron out differences, the White House went to work to undo what each had already done. Promising a veto for reauthorization legislation that restricted his agenda, Bush insisted that the final version allow for-profit air traffic control to proceed in stages. Rubber-stamp Republicans on the conference committee then folded like cheap suits and the result was legislation that permitted what each house had forbidden.

Lest anyone think that serious legislating on an important public policy issue was occurring, consider the actions of the top Republican member of the House-Senate committee, Representative Don Young of Alaska, who also chairs the House Transportation Committee. Young went along with the White House ploy, but the resulting legislation magically exempted two traffic control facilities from privatization. Not surprisingly those two facilities are in Alaska, Young presumably being willing to inflict for-profit public safety on the rest of us but not so willing to inflict it on his own constituents.

The Republicans did what they could to disguise what had happened. Young's committee statement buried the privatization scheme in a blizzard of information about the overall bill. It was made to seem small, that no major steps could be taken until late 2007, that only traffic control towers already operated privately were exempt - along with new ones and "certain other" functions. The administration chipped in with the observation that only "rural airports" were involved.

In fact, 2,000 of the system's 15,000 controllers would be affected, along with assorted certification and maintenance employees. The number of towers involved would increase to 71, including Van Nuys, Calif. (the eighth-busiest airport in the country), and 11 of the 50 busiest. The accurate way to summarize the overall traffic control situation is to note that after 2007 the entire system could be privatized.

Indeed, the White House has already helped prepare for that day by changing a basic bureaucratic definition of air traffic control from inherently governmental to "commercial activity."

There are obviously merits and demerits for any policy idea, and no liberal should instinctively oppose all privatization. What is notable about President Bush, however, is his lack of interest in the argument and his willingness to simply use muscle that subverts the legislative process in the service of an ideological position.

This is the same President Bush who has cut funding for sky marshals, consistently underfunded the operations of his Homeland Security Department, and had to be dragged screaming after 9/11 to agree that baggage handlers should not be private contractors but government employees.

If ideology trumps safety, if muscle trumps respect for process, the proper inference is that privatization of the air traffic control system is being pushed for reasons that have everything to do with private contractors and nothing to do with the public interest -- in a system that handles half the airline passengers and half the cargo in the world.