

Spin, Conspiracy and Rose-Colored Glasses; The Legacy of Marion Blakey

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When I read former FAA administrator Marion Blakey's final speech from the Aero Club of Washington, D.C. (how nice is it that I can use the word 'former' with her name), I came away completely perplexed by what she was talking about. I can't figure out if her speech was just typical 'Inside the Beltway' Washington spin or that she has the best pair of rose-colored glasses money can buy?

Blakey spoke about her accomplishments. Her accomplishments? I guess she considers creating and fostering an atmosphere of hate with every labor union she dealt with in the FAA a success! Furthermore, the work environment for union workers with the FAA is so poisoned that it will take years to repair, if it can ever be repaired at all.

Or maybe leading the FAA during the worst-delayed year in U.S. aviation history is an "accomplishment" too? She said, in her own words, that "concerns for future congestion in the air and at airports recognize that the first seven months of 2007 account for the airlines' worst on-time performance numbers of all time."

Interestingly, the former administrator waited until this speech, just hours before cleaning out her office, to decry the airlines' blatant overscheduling of key airports, such as the three majors in New York, and warned them with a pointed finger that they need to work together to solve that problem before government steps in to solve it for them. Her quote: "The airlines need to take a step back on scheduling practices that are at times out of line with reality."

Wow. Nothing like waiting until the house is burned down to call the fire department! NATCA has been out there on the record, in the media and on Capitol Hill, for SIX YEARS that overscheduling has been the biggest driver of delays and congestion. You'd think that the time to talk tough with the airlines – and then act to try and solve the problem – would have been six months ago, before countless millions of air travelers endured a brutal experience of delays, cancellations, missed connections, long waits, understaffed and overwhelmed airline customer service employees and enough finger-

pointing on national television between the Air Transport Association and others to fill a TV network newscast every night for a year.

The former administrator's speech went on to talk about safety and the need to reduce errors and runway incursions and even touched on airspace redesign in the Northeast. She said, "The FAA, with our controllers union, is committed to putting in place an ASAP program for controllers so that we have the benefits of voluntary reporting of incidents in the control room, just like airlines do in the cockpit. Also in the short term, the redesign of airspace is a critical deliverable. In New York and New Jersey we're talking about a process that's been 10 years in the making. We have a workable solution, a solution that will cut delays by 20 percent and reduces noise for 600,000 people."

Is this the same FAA that has disciplined and fired controllers for having operational errors and even for trumped-up charges of "inappropriate phraseology"? And the same FAA that earlier this year changed the way they even count and classify operational errors so that they can fudge the numbers and show, *voilà!*, a decrease? While NATCA is pleased to have been at least included in the former administrator's highly-promoted summit meeting to address runway incursions, it is indeed a mixed message to hear her say controllers will be involved in a positive way when the members I talk to daily report an authoritarian, oppressive regime of FAA management officials putting their boot down upon our necks at every turn, with a smug, "our way or the highway" attitude toward collaboration or even normal conversation.

Regarding airspace redesign, this is the point in the column where I really have to stifle my laughter. Reduce delays 20 percent? Exactly how will that be achieved? Nobody knows because nobody has asked the FAA to explain how that is possible when they are losing three experienced controllers a day to retirement and total attrition and have extreme difficulty staffing critical positions at New York TRACON, ZNY and in the

New York Towers to handle current volume, let alone future volume.

Here's something the former administrator neglected to mention in her final speech: She threw NATCA off the airspace redesign workgroup two years ago after seven loyal and hard-working years involving dozens of our members who were the only reason any part of this plan made any logistical and safety sense. The final product, however, trotted out in glamorous FAA public affairs light last month, was missing the key components of airspace extending west to Chicago and south to Miami. Instead of doing it right, the FAA decided to rebaseline itself as only it can, lowering expectations and any hope of true success.

Late in her term, AvWeb, an online aviation news publication geared toward the GA community, asked its readers in a poll, "what grade would you give Blakey for her management of the FAA?" With 7,337 votes cast, 91 percent voted for a big "F"! Coming in second was the "D" grade, with five percent of the votes (Those must have been the FAA managers and supervisors who remain the only ones in our facilities getting a raise or a full two days off a week, without mandatory OT the rest of us controllers face, since the imposition of the work rules a year ago).

The only thing I can be certain of amongst the spin, conspiracy and rose-colored glasses is that for union workers within the FAA, the agency is a much worse-off place to work than it was five years ago. Good riddance, Ms. Blakey.

"Labor never quits. We never give up the fight – no matter how tough the odds, no matter how long it takes."

–George Meany; former president, AFL-CIO

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul M. Rinaldi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.