

Today's debate: Summer flight forecast

More delays on horizon as FAA fixes fall short

Our view:

Real blame for delays lies on agency's failure to improve technology.

As the summer flying season takes off this weekend, passengers have reason to wonder whether they're in for a sizzling, irksome run of the summer of 1999, when delays surged to an all-time high.

Already, there are signs of trouble. Spare parts for such essentials as radar antennae are in such short supply that federal regulators in March sought \$77 million from Congress for that and other needs, saying the situation could slow air traffic. On Easter weekend, a Boston radar dish toppled in heavy winds, forcing hundreds of delays and cancellations, and scrambling traffic far beyond the East Coast. Then days before the busy Memorial Day weekend, a major pilots' union urged members to stop performing a controversial landing procedure that helps ease congestion at some crowded airports — a move that could snarl holiday travel.

Frequent travelers periodically surveyed by USA TODAY report drawn-out delays across the nation. Just this month, rental-car executive Joe Olivera suffered two weather mishaps, one adding 4 hours to his trip from Washington, D.C., through Dallas to Tulsa. Veteran flier Greg Hoile finds Atlanta weather delays so frequent that even rain can tack an hour onto trips, as it did twice recently.

Even the Federal Aviation Administration, pointing to unrelenting traffic growth, admits: "If we break even with last year, that is an improvement."

Why the defeatist attitude? When pressed about summer flying delays, the FAA's inevitable excuse is weather. But summer storms are older than air travel. And the FAA's elaborate plans to deal with Mother Nature merely nibble at the edges of a huge, systemic problem — a creaky, old air traffic control system grappling with ever-more crowded skies. What's more, the plan depends on delicate cooperation among airlines, air traffic controllers, pilots and the FAA — a shaky proposition if history is any guide.

Among the problems likely to complicate summer travel:

► **Delayed air traffic control improvements.** The FAA has put improvements in place in recent months, including new radar screens and the first glimmer of new technologies that would open the skies to more planes. But after a decade of excuses, key

Fliers experience cruel summer

During the summer of 1999, air delays rose 36% nationally over the previous summer. July was the cruellest month, when delays skyrocketed 76% over July 1998. The problem was national, but some airports were hit harder. Selected airports and delay increases in 1999:

1999 delays	Increase
Minneapolis-St. Paul	5,801 152%
Wayne County, Detroit	11,522 127%
Washington Dulles	9,248 93%
Chicago O'Hare	49,202 71%
Dallas-Fort Worth	16,731 59%
Cincinnati	8,376 24%
Philadelphia	14,516 26%
New York La Guardia	28,474 15%

Source: Air Transport Association By Gary Visaghtis, USA TODAY

pieces of a long-promised system for moving more planes through increasingly congested airspace continue to be delayed as the costs skyrocket. A much-touted technology that would allow more flexible routing of airplanes — certainly a boon in bad weather — was scheduled for start-up in 1998, at a cost of about \$892 million. Now, according to the Department of Transportation's inspector general, its projected cost has more than tripled to \$2.9 billion, and the FAA is saying it won't be operational until 2002.

► **Unproven stopgap solutions.** Last August, the FAA implemented several quick fixes to combat delays, including reduced buffer zones between planes in certain cases. As part of its more extensive reform package in March, the FAA promised to make earlier decisions based on national weather patterns, and move the longest-delayed airplanes first when the weather clears.

So far, however, the evidence of improvement is mixed. Delays per 1,000 operations since last October are down 5% compared to the previous year, and planes have spent 10% less time held on the ground, the FAA says. But the key measure — weather delays — is moving in the wrong direction. In April, they were up nearly 13% over last April, according to preliminary data.

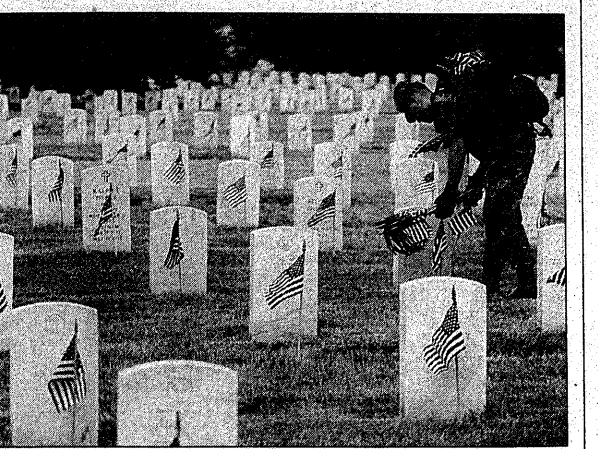
► **Unrealistic assumptions about cooperation.** The new system demands unprecedented collaboration among all of the major players. But an early test of cooperation doesn't bode well. The FAA and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) are feuding over a new FAA rule on a controversial landing procedure aimed at alleviating congestion by allowing aircraft to cross each others' paths on runways. ALPA this week urged its 58,000 members to boycott the procedure because the FAA published the rule without addressing pilots' safety concerns — a clumsy move that undermined cooperation.

Blame for the long-term problems that plague the air traffic system is splintered, making them all the harder to fix. The airlines, for instance, continue to crowd skies by scheduling more flights at the busiest airports at peak hours. One example: At Chicago's O'Hare, the scheduled number of arrivals from 7:45 p.m. to 8 p.m. was double the airport's ideal capacity in much of 1998-99, according to an FAA analysis.

No wonder a little bad weather can wreak havoc.

But blaming the weather doesn't fly. Better technology and up-to-the-minute air traffic control will enable the system to cope with whatever unpredictable weather the summer brings.

That was the FAA's promise to passengers with its new plan in March, and that has always been the agency's job.



1994 file photo by Mark Wilson, AP
Appreciation: Army Pfc. Vincent Andersen places flags on gravestones in Arlington (Va.) National Cemetery in honor of Memorial Day, observed Monday.

Memorial Day not just parades

One of the most powerful memories of my year as an exchange teacher in France was being invited to celebrate Memorial Day at the World War I Aisne-Marne American Cemetery and Memorial at Chateau-Thierry, northeast of Paris.

French and American soldiers marched side-by-side in formation, raised the French and American flags, and fired volleys to salute fallen heroes.

After the ceremony, as I walked along the rows of gleaming marble crosses and Stars of David, I asked myself, what if these soldiers were miraculously able to come back and walk the streets of our cities?

Would they feel that they had died in vain? They died to safeguard American values. How fully are these values honored in American life today? How well do we care for children at risk? How vigorously do we try to eradicate the pockets of poverty that persist despite our booming economy?

Such questions should remind us that our remembrance of the dead must not consist only of parades, flags by headstones, rifle volleys and fine-sounding speeches.

Our best tribute is to be an informed citizenry, to ceaselessly urge our members of Congress to support laws that narrow the gap between rich and poor.

At the end of the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, the dying Capt. Miller whispers to Private Ryan, "earn it" — that is, earn this life of yours that has been saved by living a life worthy of an American citizen. And when, 50 years later, Private Ryan returns to find Capt. Miller's grave in the cemetery above Omaha Beach, he seeks assurance from his wife that he indeed has lived a worthy life.

On this Memorial Day, our fallen heroes are whispering to us, too, from beyond the grave: "Earn it" — earn the citizenship that we all have been given — whether by birth or naturalization — by calling on the U.S. Congress to pass laws that will make our American values a reality.

Kenneth J. Rummenie
Buffalo, N.Y.

Remember the brave who died

Memorial Day is here again, and I know that many, if not most, Americans will enjoy it as a holiday, with no real idea of what it stands for.

One of the most overused words these days is "closure." I would like for people to think what it was like for the families, spouses and sweethearts of servicepeople of all genders and backgrounds who gave their lives in defense of our country and our many liberties.

How much "closure" do you think the families, spouses and sweethearts of the servicepeople who did not return had when loved ones were buried in cemeteries all over the world, and they never could visit their graves?

A lot of people who lost loved ones in those wars still don't know where their relatives were laid to rest today.

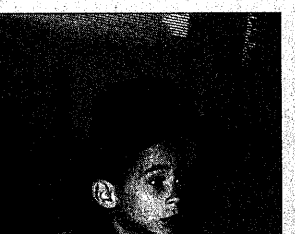
My family is fortunate, since I came home from World War II and my brother came home from Korea.

The American people should remember all of the servicepeople in all of our wars, so that a lot of people who lost fathers, mothers, daughters and sons could have some of this wonderful "closure."

Ned W. Harrison
Marble Falls, Texas

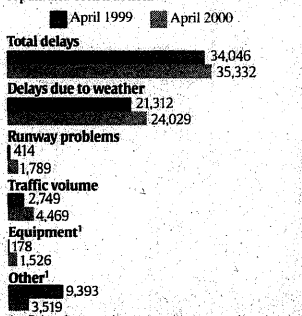
Elian: Fidel Castro's 'pioneer' in the USA

A few days ago, I saw in the Cuban newspaper, *Granma*, a picture of Elian Gonzalez wearing the infamous *Pionero* (Pioneer) uniform. It was shocking enough to see the little boy wearing a communist uniform, but what was more disturbing was the fact that he was in



Program fails to ease delays

The Federal Aviation Administration implemented a multipronged program in March to ease airport delays. Preliminary figures for its first full month in operation show increases in delays, particularly due to weather and runway repair and construction.



Source: Federal Aviation Administration

By Elizabeth Wing, USA TODAY

FAA is 'taking right steps'

Opposing view:

Despite weather challenges, agency

Last August, we took initial steps to address the delay problem, giving more authority to the General Counsel and the Inspector General to the

Racis a Sou

Diane M
DAY on "I
myth tha
Birmingham
years ("E
all these
Prior t
from the
ago, I ex
sive as t
ter's col
nothing
McWhorl
Now, a
probably
tive cross
basis tha
still exist
South or
job, I hav
various
hoods th
added
eas of to
People
just abou
commun
demagog
perspecti

Thin

USA TI
fordabili
pression
does how
In mos
TODAY's
and San
growth c
affordabl
being lirr
ing up or
pace.
In fact,
rect their
land nea
land at t
This ca
times, as
closer to
affordabl

Regu

In my
paid \$4
rates \$1
male act
male-do
unconsc
teenage
succeed
Forum, I
Babys
ature-co
have its
nite peri
once the
evening
In co
sweaty
ing rock
ment an
But u
sponsior
one only
regulate
would b
I gues
uncut