



U.S. NEWS

Trump blames 'obsolete' US air traffic control system for the plane and chopper collision near DC



1 of 11 | Rescue and salvage crews pull up a part of a Army Black Hawk helicopter that collided midair with an American Airlines jet, at a wreckage site in the Potomac River from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Thursday, Feb. 6, 2025, in Arlington, Va. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)



BY [JOSH FUNK](#)

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President Donald Trump on Thursday blamed the deadly collision of a passenger jet and Army helicopter last week on what he called an "obsolete" computer system used by U.S. air traffic controllers.

He vowed to replace it after NTSB officials told members of Congress that advanced surveillance

technology available on the helicopter was turned off.

Trump said during an event that "a lot of mistakes happened" on Jan. 29 when an American Airlines flight out of Wichita, Kansas, [collided](#) with an Army helicopter as the plane was about to land at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, [killing all 67 people](#) on board the two aircraft.

Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz said Thursday that NTSB officials in a briefing told senators that the helicopter's Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) — an aviation surveillance technology that transmits aircraft location and other data to air traffic control and other aircraft — was off.

"The reason for turning it off does not seem justified," Cruz said. "And in this instance, this was a training mission, so there was no compelling national security reason for ADS-B to be turned off."

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NTSB officials also told media outlets that the helicopter crew was likely wearing night vision goggles.

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, Trump [blamed it on diversity hiring programs](#). But on Thursday, he blamed the computer system used by the country's air traffic controllers.

During a speech at the [National Prayer Breakfast](#) at the U.S. Capitol, Trump said the U.S. spent billions of dollars trying to "renovate an old, broken system" instead of investing in a new one. He said in his private jet, he uses a system from another country when he lands because his pilot says the existing system in the U.S. is obsolete.

"I think what is going to happen is we're all going to sit down and do a great computerized system for our control towers," he said.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy and Elon Musk said in posts on X that Musk's team at the Department of Government Efficiency is going to help rapidly upgrade the nation's aviation safety system.

The Federal Aviation Administration has been working since the mid-2000s to upgrade the air traffic control system through its [NextGen program](#).

Federal officials [have been raising concerns](#) about an overtaxed and understaffed air traffic control system for years, especially after a series of close calls between planes at U.S. airports. Among the

reasons they have cited for staffing shortages are uncompetitive pay, long shifts, intensive training and mandatory retirements.

Trump said that if the nation had a newer system, alarms would have sounded when the Black Hawk helicopter, which was on a training exercise, reached the same altitude as the plane.

But an FAA report after the crash said that the controller did get an alert that the plane and helicopter were converging when they were still more than a mile (1.6 kilometers) apart. The controller responded by asking the helicopter if it had the plane in sight and directed the helicopter to pass behind the plane. The helicopter responded that it did have the plane in sight.

The FAA made it clear Thursday it is going to ensure that helicopters and planes will no longer share the same airspace over the Potomac River.

An early focus of the investigation has been confirming the altitude of the plane and helicopter. The jet's flight recorder showed its altitude as 325 feet (99 meters), plus or minus 25 feet (7.6 meters).

Data from the airport's air traffic control system suggests the helicopter was above its 200-foot (61-meter) flight ceiling. The screen the controller was looking at that night showed that based on radar and other data, the helicopter was at 300 feet (91 meters), the NTSB said, noting that the figure would have been rounded to the nearest 100 feet (30 meters).

To get more precise information, investigators need to be able to examine the wreckage of the Black Hawk. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Thursday afternoon that all major components of the helicopter and jet have been removed from the river. Salvage crews will work to remove smaller debris with baskets over the next 10 days before finishing work on Feb. 16.

"We will continue pushing forward in the coming days until we are confident the river is safe for navigation and that elements of evidentiary value are recovered and provided to the appropriate authorities," the Corps Baltimore District Commander Col. Francis Pera said.

This crash was the [deadliest in the U.S.](#) since Nov. 12, 2001, when a jet slammed into a New York City neighborhood just after takeoff, killing all 260 people on board and five on the ground.

There was concern after the crash that Trump's efforts to [slash the size](#) of the federal workforce could worsen the shortage of air traffic controllers if some of them accepted the [deferred resignation offers](#) sent to all federal employees last week. But air traffic controllers were told by their union Thursday that certain positions within the Federal Aviation Administration, including theirs, were exempt.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association said in its email to members that additional positions might be exempt based on the employees' "national security or public safety responsibilities." The union had already recommended to its members that they reject the offers, which were extended the day before the midair collision.

Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani, Adriana Gomez Licon and Thomas Beaumont contributed to this report.



JOSH FUNK

Funk is an Associated Press reporter who covers all the major freight railroads including Union Pacific, BNSF, Norfolk Southern, CSX, Canadian National and CPKC. Funk also covers Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway and has been attending Buffett's "Woodstock for Capitalists" annual meeting every spring in Omaha, Nebraska, for 19 years.



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