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Did Trump's firing of aviation officials contribute to the D.C. crash? Experts say it's unlikely

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Even as emergency responders were working to recover the remains of passengers and crew members who died in the Jan. 29 midair collision near the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, social media users, especially critics of President Donald Trump, pointed to some of Trump's policies as contributors to the crash.

"Just last week, Trump FIRED the heads of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Coast Guard, and disbanded the Aviation Security Advisory Committee," one [X post](#) read. The [Associated Press reported](#) Jan. 21 that Trump fired those heads and removed all members of the committee.

Another [X post](#) read, "On your 2ND DAY, you 1. Fired the head of the Transportation Security Administration, 2. Fired the entire Aviation Security Advisory Committee, 3. Froze hiring of all Air Traffic Controllers, 4. Fired 100 top FAA security officers."

Trump in his first week in office did announce sweeping personnel changes, including a hiring freeze. But aviation experts said there was little that Trump did that could have precipitated the crash between a commercial jet from Wichita, Kansas, and a military Black Hawk helicopter. There was simply too little time — less than 10 days after Trump was sworn in — for any of his broadly worded executive orders to have had an effect, experts said.

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Although the Transportation Safety Administration, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Aviation Security Advisory Committee all play roles in aviation safety, "the actions by President Trump would not have led to such an immediate impact," said Jim Cardoso, a former U.S. Air

Force colonel and pilot who is now senior director of the University of South Florida's Global and National Security Institute.

"All the processes to control and deconflict air traffic in the D.C. area have been well established for a long time," Cardoso said. "The personnel involved in the accident — air crew from the two aircraft and the (air traffic controllers) in place at the time of the accident — would similarly not have been affected by" the recent policy changes in Trump's executive orders since Jan. 20.

It's also unwise to speculate on causes so soon after a crash, said John Cox, a retired pilot who runs a St. Petersburg, Florida-based aviation security consulting firm.

"At this point, we don't know enough," Cox said Jan. 30. Anyone who argues that a specific factor caused the crash not even 24 hours after it happens is making an argument "without foundation," he said.

Cox said the international standard for determining what caused a crash "is not to speculate. You stay with the facts. The idea is that it's more important to get the right answer than a politically motivated answer."

The investigation into the collision will likely take months. For now, here's what we know about what actions Trump has taken related to aviation and what effect, if any, they could have had on this crash.

What did Trump do regarding aviation?

In a Jan. 20 **executive order**, Trump enacted a hiring freeze on federal civilian employees, stopping any open positions from being filled and any new positions from being created.

However, this order exempted military personnel, positions "related to immigration enforcement, national security, or public safety." Air traffic control would be exempted from the hiring freeze because of its role in public safety, the White House told PolitiFact. The White House also said that, unlike political appointees, air traffic controllers do not change between administrations.

On Jan. 21, Trump signed the **executive order**, "Keeping Americans Safe in Aviation." It eliminated diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, hiring and directed the transportation secretary and the administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration to "return to non-discriminatory, merit-based hiring."

WATCH: Trump signs aviation order to assess 'damage' done to air safety by diversity policies

It also ordered performance reviews for "individuals in critical safety positions."

Speaking to reporters Jan. 30, Trump blamed FAA diversity and inclusion hiring policies for the crash.

Cox said all the pilots and the air traffic controllers involved in the Jan. 29 crash would, by definition, have undergone the required training requirements and "met the standards to be in that job" and any adherence to DEI rules would not have changed that.

The New York Times **reported** Jan. 30 that staffing at the air traffic control tower was "not normal for the time of day and volume of traffic," according to an internal preliminary Federal Aviation Administration safety report. The Reagan airport tower has been understaffed for years, in part because of employee turnover and tight budgets, the Times reported.

Meanwhile, the Associated Press **reported** Jan. 21 that Trump had fired TSA Administrator David Pekoske and Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Linda Fagan.

However, the TSA's safety responsibilities generally revolve around security screening of passengers, cargo and aviation workers, not the operation of planes. And the Coast Guard focuses on maritime security.

Trump also fired all members of the Aviation Security Advisory Committee, a group that includes representatives of private-sector aviation groups. They advise the TSA administrator on aviation security. The group was scheduled to meet Feb. 26; it usually **meets four times a year**.

An **X post** claimed that Trump fired 400 "senior officials" of the Federal Aviation Administration and 3,000 air traffic controllers eight days ago. But this is unsubstantiated, and the White House told PolitiFact that no air traffic controllers had been fired.

In May 2024, CNN **reported** that, based on FAA numbers, air traffic control stations were facing a shortage of 3,000 controllers, with concerns that worker shortages were contributing to long shifts and exhaustion.

PolitiFact Researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

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