

Mid-air collision between passenger flight and military helicopter kills 67 in US capital

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On Wednesday evening at approximately 9:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, a Black Hawk military helicopter carrying three soldiers collided with American Airlines Flight 5342, a commercial jet carrying 60 people and four crew, as it was attempting to land at Ronald Reagan National Airport in Arlington, Virginia, causing both to crash into the Potomac River just outside the US capital.

As of Thursday afternoon, 28 bodies have been recovered and federal authorities believe that there are no survivors. The search continues for the remains of the other 39 dead and for data recorders and other instruments that might provide information about the causes of the disaster.

The tragedy reveals both the ongoing decay of the US infrastructure and the even more rapid decline of the political leadership of the American ruling elite. The crash was the first mass casualty air disaster in the US since 2009 but follows a series of dangerous near-misses and narrowly avoided “accidents” that are a byproduct of the systematic overloading and deregulation of the air traffic system over many decades.

And as far as political leadership goes, President Donald Trump managed one minute of an entirely phony display of sympathy for the victims and their families, before seizing on the disaster to push ahead with his fascist agenda based on the demonization of workers, including minorities, immigrants, the disabled and those being super-exploited in occupations like air traffic control.

The commercial flight was coming from Wichita, Kansas, and included in its passenger list American and Russian figure skaters and coaches, who had been participating in the US Figure Skating Championships there.

While the exact cause of the collision is still unclear, it is suspected that a number of mechanisms in the Federal Aviation Administration’s safety net may have failed or had been circumvented in order to produce the horrific accident.

Guy Gratton, a professor of aviation and the environment at Britain’s Cranfield University, told the *Washington Post* that he suspected a “procedural breakdown” had occurred. “In any airspace, there are very strict procedures to ensure that aircraft are never in the same place at the same time,” he said. “They are a mixture of technology and visual rule following, and they work because accidents like this are thankfully incredibly rare.”

New York Times cited an internal FAA safety report on Thursday which notes that staffing levels among Reagan National Airport’s Air Traffic Controllers (ATCs) was “not normal for the time of day and volume of traffic.” The report states that the ATC “who was handling helicopters in the airport’s vicinity Wednesday night was also instructing planes that were landing and departing from its runways.” These tasks generally “are assigned to two controllers, rather than one.”

In 2023, then Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg released information noting that there was an approximately 3,000-person shortage of ATCs in the FAA. The Department of Transportation also revealed that 77 percent of all air traffic control facilities are understaffed. In New York, such facilities are operating at around 54 percent of the necessary labor force.

The outright loss of ATCs is the inevitable product of policies going back for decades which have eroded basic safety and operating standards in this high-pressure work environment. Following the betrayal and smashing of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike, in which 13,000 workers had their union broken up by the Republican Reagan administration while the AFL-CIO stood by, workers’ pay has been cut along with benefits, while workload has steadily mounted, all contributing to a long-term decline in the number of controllers in the workforce.

This has led to an ever-increasing number of close calls on runways. A *Times* article from 2023 noted that “close calls” and near-collisions among pilots have increased by nearly 25 percent over the last decade.

Reagan National Airport, perversely renamed for the president who did more than any other to wreck safe air travel, is, according to the *Post*, located in a region that “poses some of the most complex challenges in the country for pilots, requiring them to rely on layers of procedures and electronic safeguards to avoid a catastrophe.”

The level of air traffic, the proximity to the White House, Capitol, Pentagon and other major buildings, combined with extremely compact landing space “has raised safety concerns for years. National was built to handle 15 million passengers annually; it now handles 25 million.”

Significantly, an FAA reauthorization bill which passed last year over the opposition of Maryland and Virginia

congressional leaders added five additional flights at Reagan National despite warnings of overloading that would produce congestion and potential disaster. Now that disaster has taken place.

The presence of various military agencies and bases in the region seems to have helped create conditions leading to the collision.

According to *Aviation Today*, in 2019 the FAA allowed military aircraft flying “sensitive operations” in the US to turn their automatic dependent surveillance broadcast (ADS-B) systems off due to concerns the satellite tracking technology could compromise the vehicle’s location. It is not known if this was the case in Wednesday’s crash.

According to military officials who spoke to the press, the Black Hawk helicopter was engaged in a Continuity of Government (COG) exercise, that is, a drill to simulate military operations in the midst of or after an armed attack on Washington, in which top government officials would be taken to an “undisclosed secure location,” as Vice President Dick Cheney was on September 11, 2001.

The COG training mission, which is billed as a means to keep the government functioning in case of a major attack, was one of tens of thousands of yearly military flights in the area.

The flight path of the helicopter suggests that it may have been returning from a high security location, perhaps at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, which is well north of downtown Washington along the Potomac River. It flew south along the river towards its base at Ft. Belvoir, when the passenger plane was coming in for a landing at the main runway at Reagan, flying north up the river.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth did confirm that the helicopter pilots were operating with night-vision goggles. In a comment to the *Times*, former Army Special Operations helicopter pilot Mike Sagely stated, “[i]f the airplane is below the horizon line, which it probably was [as it landed], [it] blended in with all the lights.” The question of whether the helicopter had veered slightly off its course is also being investigated.

President Trump, while first declaring “we don’t know” the cause of the crash, launched into a bigoted and fascist tirade, claiming that “diversity, equity and inclusion” policies had lowered hiring standards at the FAA and caused the crash.

“We want the most competent people. ... If they don’t have a great brain, a great power of the brain, they’re not going to be very good at what they do and bad things will happen,” Trump stated at a press briefing.

The president attacked the “Biden administration’s DEI and woke policies” for hiring job candidates “who suffer severe intellectual disabilities, psychiatric problems and other mental and physical conditions.”

Continuing his rant, apparently derived from a single article published a year ago in the right-wing *New York Post*, Trump singled out federal workers with “hearing and vision

difficulties”; “missing extremities”; “partial paralysis, full paralysis”; and “dwarfism” as having dangerously compromised the public’s safety. Asked by a reporter how he knew what had caused the accident before any investigation, Trump replied, “Because I have common sense. OK?”

After his deranged remarks, a parade of top administration officials, including Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy, Secretary of Defense Hegseth and Vice President JD Vance, all followed with remarks largely devoted to praising Trump for his supposed “leadership” on the matter and reiterating his denunciations of “DEI” policies for having caused the accident.

The most openly racist comments came from Vice President Vance. He claimed, “[y]ou have many hundreds of people suing the government because they would like to be air traffic controllers, but they were turned away because of the color of their skin.”

Trump followed these statements with a White House memorandum declaring the crash to be the result of “problematic and likely illegal decisions during the Obama and Biden Administrations that minimized merit and competence in the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).”

Besides being ignorant, bigoted and racist, Trump’s comments were factually wrong. The FAA’s directives on hiring “diversity” have been a prominent aspect of its policy going back to 2013. The hiring of a diverse workforce, including people suffering “intellectual and psychiatric disabilities,” remained policy throughout Trump’s previous administration. And none of the few dozen hires under this category had anything to do with either air traffic control operations or the tragedy of January 29, for which they have been viciously and unfairly scapegoated by the fascist president.



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