



Opinion: Why Two Pilots In The Cockpit Remains Essential

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Imagine you are a passenger on an airline flight when suddenly you hear a loud pop, and the oxygen masks deploy. As you put yours on, your heart starts to race and you look quickly around the cabin to see what is happening. Behind and in front of you, flight attendants have sprung into action as the aircraft begins to descend. You don't know the extent of the crisis, but minutes later you are safely on the ground.

A similar scenario recently occurred when [Southwest Airlines](#) Flight 1380 (SWA1380) experienced a massive engine failure midflight. While flight attendants and passengers were working together to help in the cabin, Capt. Tammie Jo Shults and First Officer Darren Ellisor responded to the crisis. With oxygen masks on and battling the deafening noise and distractions, the crew resorted to hand signals to communicate, executing emergency procedures to bring the aircraft to a safe landing.

Though we mourn the one life lost on SWA1380, the high level of skill and professionalism exhibited by the captain and first officer helped save 148 other lives. This accident serves as a stark reminder that the most important safety features on every passenger or cargo airline are an adequately rested, highly qualified and well-trained pilot and co-pilot in the cockpit. Pilot training, experience and judgment save lives.

Airliners are intentionally designed for more than one pilot on the flight deck because safety and operations require it, especially in the dynamic and constantly changing environment in which we fly. Airline pilots must operate the aircraft, interact with air traffic control and dispatch, keep up to date on current weather and forecasts and monitor the performance of aircraft engines and systems.

To manage the workload, a minimum two-person flight crew is necessary, as it also protects against the potential incapacitation of one pilot. The current first officer qualification rules have ensured that both pilots are highly qualified and trained, while fatigue-management rules have vastly improved how rested pilots are.

It is in because of those rules in part that today is the safest time to be an airline passenger. Even so, we press on, continuing to research and discover further improvements to aviation safety and security.



Yet some want to take us in the opposite direction, threatening this unparalleled record of aviation safety by actually removing pilots from the cockpit. In April, at the 11th hour and with no advance notice or input from pilots or the flying public, a provision was inserted into the House version of the [FAA](#) Reauthorization Act of 2018 (H.R. 4), called Section 744. This would establish a research and development program in support of single-pilot cargo aircraft assisted by remote and computer piloting.

Removing pilots from the cockpit and placing crewmembers in a remote location would jeopardize the quality of crew coordination and undermine the safety and security measures that have been in place for years, putting lives at risk. Let's face it, at 35,000 ft., who would you trust on the flight deck: a pilot or a programmer?

In September 2017, [NASA](#) published the results of a study titled "An Assessment of Reduced-Crew and Single-Pilot Operations in Commercial Transport Aircraft Operations." It states that the data "show significant increases in workload for single-pilot operations, compared to two-crew, with subjective assessments of safety and performance being significantly degraded." It adds that the data "support the criticality of the human's role and the adaptability of human pilots/flight crew that is instrumental in overcoming non-normal conditions and in completing safe recoveries."

Since we already know what the research proposed by Section 744 will demonstrate, why are taxpayers being asked to pay for this once again?

Remember [US Airways](#) Flight 1549, known as the "Miracle on the Hudson," involving Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and First Officer Jeff Skiles? This example and countless others provide ample testimony that having two highly experienced and qualified pilots in the cockpit can make all the difference when the unthinkable occurs. No one has ever thought: "I wish my pilot was less skilled or experienced—or not in the airplane at all."

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) adamantly opposes Section 744, and we have mobilized to stop it. More than 160 pilots have stormed Capitol Hill to demand that this dangerous provision be removed.

But it should not be our fight alone, as it affects passengers, cargo shippers and everyone who depends on safe air transport for business or leisure. ALPA will continue to use every resource at its disposal to ensure that airlines keep pilots on the flight deck and maintain the highest levels of safety. Since 1931, the pilots of ALPA have worked to improve aviation safety and security, and we are not backing down now.

Tim Canoll is the president of the Air Line Pilots Association, International, the world's largest pilot union, representing more than 60,000 pilots at 34 airlines in the U.S. and Canada. The views expressed are not necessarily those of Aviation Week.

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