Politics Snarls Travel & Tourism

By Dr. Richard Kelley

The skies over the United States are not so friendly these days as more and more airline flights and their passengers are being delayed, allegedly as a result of the Federal Aviation Administration's budget having been cut. The truth is that there is plenty of money for the FAA to carry on essential operations and a whole lot more, but politicians are trying to use flight delays to stir up anger and reduce opposition to raising taxes and increasing federal spending. This ill-conceived agenda may well backfire but in the process it is putting Travel & Tourism, America's No. 1 export industry, in danger.

Travel within the continental U.S. is a mess this week. FlightAware.com, which tracks flight delays and cancellations, counted 4,749 delays and 273 cancellations of U.S. flights by 5 p.m. Tuesday. There were 6,670 delays and 333 cancellations for all of Monday, according to FlightAware and reported in USA Today.

Punishing U.S. citizens and conservative leaders who try to rein in the growth of government is hardly new. Columnist Mike Rosen writes in the Denver Post that “such activity has its roots in 1969, when President Richard Nixon sought to cut the budget of the National Park Service. Rather than cutting any fat or non-essential activities, Park Service director George Hertzog threatened to restrict tourist visits to the Washington Monument. In the face of such an intolerable step, Congress restored the cuts.”

In a similar gambit, President Obama recently shut down tours of the White House by schoolchildren, saying budget cutting made it necessary. Yet, there was no problem finding federal funding for the president to take a weekend trip to Florida for golf lessons and a round with Tiger Woods, while first lady Michelle Obama and daughters Malia and Sasha are on an annual skiing vacation out West. (In fairness, I should point out that although some of the first lady’s vacations have drawn criticism, the Obamas, like other presidential families, pay for their own room, board and transportation when traveling in a private capacity. However, the cost of accompanying Secret Service agents is picked up by the government. And the first family is expected to reimburse the government for the use of Air Force One only to the extent of the cost of first-class air tickets, which is considerably less than the actual cost to the government.)

According to reports I have read, the FAA budget was cut by about 4 percent, reducing its funding to approximately the 2010 level. Instead of cutting non-essential spending (and there is lots of it), FAA head Michael Huerta cut spending on almost every line item in his budget. Working hours for air-traffic controllers were cut by 10 percent at every airport regardless of size or number of flights handled daily. Napa Valley Airport, with no commercial air traffic, was cut 10 percent and so was New York Central Radar, which serves thousands of flights daily at nearby JFK, Newark, LaGuardia and a number of other regional airports.

As a result, about 40 percent of flights across the U.S. were delayed this week. As I write this article on Thursday afternoon, FlightAware.com reports the delay at Newark International Airport (EWR) is currently 2 hours and 18 minutes. Under the Passenger Bill of Rights, which was signed by Obama in 2011, carriers are fined millions of dollars if they keep passengers sitting on the tarmac for three hours or more. Will the FAA be similarly fined if the wait for passengers at EWR hits the three-hour level? (I hear someone laughing.)

Commenting on the flight delays, United Airlines CEO Jeff Smisek said, “What is happening here is the unfortunate result of the federal government’s dysfunctional political process, and you, the airline industry and the traveling public are caught in the crossfire of Washington politics. We encourage you to write to your elected officials and join us in telling Washington to reverse this irresponsible and unnecessary plan. For more information, go to the Airlines For America website at www.dontgroundamerica.com.”

More than 18,000 people have left comments on that website pressuring Washington to immediately end the air traffic controller furloughs that have caused flight delays this week. Not a single one supported the government’s approach to cutting the FAA budget.

It looks as if the latest version of the “Washington Monument Gambit” is dramatically failing in the eyes of the American public. It is a disaster and may well affect the outcome of this fall’s elections, including the vital race in Hawai’i for a seat in the U.S. Senate.