

# Reflections on humanity's perverse priorities in the wake of the DC air crash

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There is a particular and predictable rhythm to these things. The plane crashes, the authorities arrive, the media surges forward with its standard refrains. Debris is analysed, flight logs scrutinized, and for a moment – a brief, incandescent moment – humanity is confronted with the idea that air travel is not, in fact, a perfect equation. Then, the moment passes. The skies fill once more, the machinery of global transit lurches forward, and the collective astonishment that catastrophe might intrude upon human convenience dissolves into the next news cycle.

This time, it was January 29, 2025, in the Washington, DC area of the United States. Probably fewer than eighty lives were lost, though the official count remains undisclosed at the time of writing. The investigators murmur about mechanical failure, about wind shear, about the intricacies of aerodynamics as though such events require a grand conspiracy of factors rather than the banal arithmetic of probability. Of course, there is sorrow – an outpouring of it. There are televised vigils and earnest pleas for answers. There is the desperate need to ensure that this, somehow, was an aberration, a glitch in the system rather than the inevitable price of a world that moves at six hundred miles per hour.

That price is rarely spoken of in its full dimensions. The skies brim with flights – more than half a billion of them over the past two decades alone (Statista, 2024). Each take-off and landing is a tiny act of planetary defiance, a momentary disruption in the atmosphere that, in sum, becomes an onslaught. The International Civil Aviation Organization (2024) suggests that air travel accounts for about two per cent of total global carbon dioxide emissions, but such numbers are deceptive, reductive, barely even the preface to the full impact (*cf.* Lee *et al.*, 2021). The contrails carve lines into the sky, the engines churn pollutants into the air, the entire biosphere shifts and groans beneath the weight of this ceaseless movement.

And yet, the moment a fraction of a fraction of those who partake in this system are harmed by their luxurious human entitlements, the human world recoils in horror. A single, rare crash. Fewer than eighty lives lost. No doubt a tragedy for the individuals, families and friends directly affected, but treated as though this were an unfathomable disaster, an offence against the natural order. But the natural order was abandoned long ago, in favour of speed, in favour of efficiency, in favour of bending time and space to human luxury – not human necessity and certainly not human humility.

It is the fundamental asymmetry of the human condition, this belief that the damage exacted on the world is a minor footnote, while even the most infinitesimal risks faced by humanity itself are an intolerable injustice. The forests erode, the coral reefs bleach, migratory patterns shift under the steady drumbeat of jet engines, but none of this provokes the same visceral reaction as a plummeting fuselage and an emergency broadcast. That such incidents are rare, that the loss is statistically insignificant against the backdrop of global travel, only makes the reaction more revealing.

Perhaps what is most telling is not that air travel continues, but that it has become so utterly ordinary. The extraordinary, the miraculous, has been trivialized. What was once a technological wonder – crossing entire continents in the time it takes to read a book – has been stripped of awe, reduced to a dull expectation. And with expectation comes entitlement. A certainty that movement should be effortless, that distance should be meaningless – and that human lives should be invulnerable to the very risks they create.

The wreckage on the outskirts of Washington will be cleared soon enough. The emergency crews will finish their reports. The black box recordings will be dissected, the regulatory bodies will draft their recommendations, and the same patterns will unfold once again. What will not happen – what never happens – is any true reckoning with the larger cost, the unfathomable price that is extracted every day from the planet to sustain this enterprise of perpetual motion.

Because, in the end, the calculation has already been made. Humanity will continue to grieve its own losses, to clutch its collective pearls at the rare occasions when the machine turns against its operators. But the deeper loss, the erosion of the living world beneath the weight of aviation's relentless advance, will remain a silent casualty – unnoticed, unacknowledged, irrelevant in the face of exponentially more pressing concerns.

And so the cycle persists.

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