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EDITORIALS

When tragedy rattles trust: American 191 and the Boeing 737 Max

To take flight as a passenger in a large airplane is disorienting. Let's be honest, it is unnatural for us wingless humans to soar above the earth. Yet U.S. commercial air travel is so common and reliable that fliers worry about whether the onboard Wi-Fi works without questioning how the gigantic metal bird stays aloft.

Until turbulence hits — or a new Boeing jet is grounded. That's when some air travelers momentarily lose faith in science and technology, despite the excellent safety record of modern aviation. Flying is safer than driving, yes. But we expect prayers are more commonly murmured en route to LaGuardia than during morning commutes on the Edens Expressway.

Appreciation for the wonders of flying — sipping coffee at 35,000 feet, arriving in London just seven hours after departing Chicago — is tempered because travelers know the results can be catastrophic if something goes wrong. Chicagoans of a certain age will corroborate that reality with specific memories: Forty years ago, on the afternoon of May 25, 1979, American Airlines Flight 191 crashed and burned just after takeoff from O'Hare International Airport, killing all 258 passengers and 13 crew, plus two people on the ground. It remains the worst air disaster in the United States.

A photograph published by the Tribune showed the doomed jet lurching sickeningly to its side in the sky. One of the McDonnell Douglas DC-10's three engines had dropped from a wing mounting onto the



JOHN BARTLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

runway, crippling the plane's ability to gain altitude. Investigators determined that workers at American's repair facility in Tulsa, Okla., had damaged the wing assembly by using an improper procedure to change out engines. Other airlines had used the same technique because it saved time. DC-10s were grounded for a time, and

the appalling quick-change engine procedure was banned — decisions that reflect the strong culture of aviation safety and oversight in the United States.

Four decades later a comparable crisis involves Chicago-based Boeing's 737 Max jetliners. The new plane is highly comput-

erized — and grounded worldwide after two fatal crashes overseas in less than five months. The planes, Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, went down shortly after takeoff. In each incident investigators speculate that an automated flight safety system known as MCAS sent the aircraft into a nosedive after mistakenly concluding that the plane was climbing too steeply and at risk of stalling.

Boeing has a lot to answer for in the 737 Max's cockpit design, pilot training and safety protocols. Investigations are in progress. Boeing says it has fixed a software problem with MCAS and plans to have the aircraft recertified by the FAA and other agencies. Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg says the 737 Max "will be one of the safest airplanes ever to fly."

Muilenburg and Boeing will have to persuade the flying public to board the suspect jet. As in the aftermath of Flight 191, Boeing will need to come clean with regulators, airlines and passengers about everything that went wrong. Most glaringly, how (if preliminary judgments hold) did Boeing allow two planes to crash themselves due to the same software glitch?

To fly is to suspend fear of gravity. Passengers trust aviation science, but confidence in air travel isn't absolute. That's why Boeing's 737 Max jets are grounded, and why Flight 191 is remembered: The miracle of flight requires faith in technologies that can never be perfect.