

THOSE WHO TRAVEL by commercial airlines have long relied on the Federal Aviation Administration to be their protector against disaster. The FAA certifies that the planes on which they fly are airworthy. It also controls the paths those planes follow, and sets the safety requirements the airlines must meet. So it is upsetting—to put it quite mildly—to discover that the FAA has not been particularly vigilant in making air travel as safe as it might be. There is no other conclusion that can be drawn from the report of a House subcommittee on the way the FAA has handled certain safety problems, most particularly those concerning the McDonnell Douglas DC-10.

The problem with this particular airplane is that the cargo-door, as originally designed, was faulty. The manufacturer and the FAA have known about it for at least two years but the FAA did not require modifications in the door until after a DC-10 crashed near Paris last March killing 346 people. It had relied, instead, on a bulletin suggesting that the door be modified. There appears to have been no sense of urgency, either at the FAA or at McDonnell Douglas, about the need for the changes.

If this were an isolated incident, it might be possible to put it to one side as a bureaucratic mistake. Indeed,

since a self-examination inside the FAA after the Paris crash, the administration had made some substantial changes in its operations to insure this does not happen again. But there are other incidents related in the long subcommittee report, and some of them were presented in highly dramatic form in a recent ABC television showing that suggested the DC-10 is not an isolated case. It is hard to avoid wondering whether the FAA has been paying too much attention to the economic impact on manufacturers and airlines of various safety devices or whether it has simply been suffering from that chronic illness of regulatory agencies—a bureaucracy that has become tentative in its decisions and too intimate with the industry it is charged with regulating.

It may well be that more changes are needed at the FAA than its administrator, Alexander Butterfield, has made in the last few months. The FAA does have many different assignments in the field of civil aviation. But the single most important one of these is safety. No one expects this agency to make air travel totally safe. Human error and unanticipated events will occur. But it is not acceptable for the FAA to be caught doing less than it might do to eliminate unnecessary risks. And that is what the House subcommittee seems to have done.