

The social paradox in the “miraculous” rescue on the Hudson

17 January 2009

It is impossible not to be moved by accounts of the crash Thursday afternoon of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River near Manhattan and its aftermath, the successful rescue of all 150 passengers and 5 crew members. A combination of extraordinary professionalism, skill, courage and elementary human camaraderie produced this astonishing outcome.

The odds seemed heavily stacked against a happy outcome. A few minutes after takeoff from New York's LaGuardia Airport, Flight 1549 apparently flew into a flock of birds and lost power in both of its Airbus A320 engines. Pilot Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and his co-pilot thus found themselves at the controls of a powerless jetliner, weighing tens of thousands of pounds and carrying 153 other human beings, directly above one of the world's major metropolitan areas. The potential for a horrifying disaster was enormous.

Sullenberger indicated to air traffic controllers that he was "unable" to either return to LaGuardia or reach the small airport in nearby Teterboro, New Jersey. Instead, he turned southward along the Hudson River, which separates Manhattan and New Jersey, flew over the George Washington Bridge and landed the aircraft safely in the middle of the river.

Sullenberger and his co-pilot deftly landed the plane in such a manner, "with its nose up, and on its fuselage," that the plane "managed to stay afloat immediately after impact" (*New York Times*).

The setting down of the airplane was not the last challenge. January 15 was one of the coldest days of the year so far in New York, with an air temperature of 18 degrees Fahrenheit (-8 degrees Celsius) and a water temperature of 35 degrees (2 Celsius). Immersion in water at such temperatures even for a few minutes can be fatal.

With the passengers arrayed on the wings of the sinking plane, within minutes "the water was churned by an ad hoc flotilla of boats and ferries flying the flags of almost every city, state and federal agency that works the waters around New York City. They sped toward the slowly sinking jet, a

rescue operation complicated by river currents that kept dragging the plane south" (*New York Times*).

The passengers too responded with considerable aplomb, calmly aiding one another and exhibiting remarkable unselfishness. A female passenger, a Bank of America executive, told the *Washington Post*, "The most amazing part was, I saw no pushing, no shoving. I saw nothing but help and compassion."

A passenger on board the first ferry that arrived on the scene explained that as those rescued from the icy Hudson came aboard, "We were holding people, hugging them, reassuring them, holding their hands, warming them with our body heat" (*New York Times*).

A great deal of the credit, deservedly, has gone to Sullenberger, 57, a resident of northern California. His online résumé indicates a high level of seriousness about airplane safety and related matters. In addition to having spent some 40 years in the aviation industry and flown some 19,000 hours in various aircraft, Sullenberger has pressed for many safety and maintenance innovations and served in the past as an Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) local air safety chairman, as well as the union's accident investigator. He is also a glider pilot, which served him in good stead Thursday.

Interviewed by the media, his wife Lorrie described Sullenberger as "a pilot's pilot" who "loves the art of the airplane." Not an insignificant comment.

Such an incident exposes a social paradox.

Politicians, ever the opportunists, are quick to hail those responsible for operations such as Thursday's on the Hudson as "heroes." New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg offered Sullenberger the key to the city, declaring, "We saw a lot of heroism in the Hudson yesterday.... The perfect landing, the phenomenal response, the rescue of every single person."

The local and national media, predictably, were beside themselves over the "miracle on the Hudson." Anything to distract attention from the endless stream of dire economic news.

US Airways chief executive Doug Parker called the rescue operation "truly a remarkable effort.... I'm honored to thank

all of you for all you did."

The hollowness and hypocrisy of many of these comments emerges when one considers the nearly continuous attacks such ordinary "heroes" have faced in recent years and the degree to which such levels of professionalism and skill are being undermined by the policies of the corporate elite and the government.

Airline pilots and flight crews have faced a devastating assault on their income, working conditions and morale. US Airways (a descendant of Allegheny Airlines) has undergone two bankruptcies and shredded workers' jobs, benefits and pensions along the way, while enriching executives like Parker.

A Pittsburgh newspaper reported in 2006 that nearly 9,000 US Airways employees in that area alone had lost their jobs since 2001. In 2003, the airline was one of the first major carriers to rid itself of pilots' pensions in the interests of cutting costs, releasing the pension fund to the federal Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, a move that inevitably results in a reduction in pension benefits. In 2008, the US Airline Pilots Association, bargaining agent for the carrier's pilots, alleged that US Airways, in response to the rising price of oil, was pressuring its pilots to carry less fuel, subjecting those who refused to retaliatory discipline.

A 2006 comment painted a dismal picture of pilots' conditions: "Their pay and pensions have been cut, and they work more hours to earn it. In another concession to the airlines, their days are interrupted more than ever by long hours of unpaid idleness."

Capt. John Prater, ALPA president, told the *Christian Science Monitor* in early 2008: "Right now, airlines are placing money, productivity—how much work can you get out of a pilot—ahead of safety and having well-rested, nonfatigued pilots at the controls of your airplane."

As for New York's public employees, the city's billionaire mayor, Bloomberg, along with New York Democratic Governor David Paterson, is pursuing sweeping budget cuts and layoffs that will further erode the safety and well-being of residents.

For example, in November 2008, Bloomberg announced an \$8.9 million cut in the Fire Department's budget, resulting in the elimination of nighttime shifts at five engine companies and cuts to the firefighting academy reducing the training period for probationary firefighters from 23 to 18 weeks. As the mayor made clear, this was only the beginning.

Ironically, the city's Disaster Preparedness and Response Program of the Human Services Council of New York City, an umbrella group of local nonprofit organizations, was closed down for good in July 2008 as a result of state budget restraints. A Human Services Council representative

observed, "Memories seem to be short in terms of what is necessary when there's a disaster in the city of New York. This is not only about a terrorist attack. This is about hurricanes and coastal flooding and things like that."

When media attention is not shining on them, the "heroes" of the Hudson River rescue and their counterparts throughout the country (like those involved in the remarkable rescue operation, captured live on national television last month, when a burst water main flooded a roadway in Bethesda, Maryland) will be treated as brutally and indifferently as every other worker in the US. The elite that runs the US views workers as disposable riff-raff.

And should airline workers, firefighters, city employees or others take action to oppose wage and job cuts, the politicians and media will turn on a dime and denounce them as "greedy," "selfish" and "thuggish," as Bloomberg and the New York tabloids did during the 2005 transit workers strike.

There is one more aspect of this story. One ingredient, seemingly omnipresent in American life, was noticeably absent from Thursday's rescue operation: the profit principle. Americans have been told for decades that the pursuit of private wealth is the highest, if not the only, serious human motive. Official public opinion has held social cooperation, compassion and self-sacrifice up to contempt and ridicule. If it wasn't openly said, it was implied, that these qualities were "socialistic."

As it turns out, the immediate response of everyone involved with the rescue operation on Thursday was solidarity, not self-interest. Selfishness does not come naturally to human beings, especially in moments of calamity. The unfolding economic crisis, impoverishing wide layers of the population and exposing the vast social divide in America, will bring out the best in the healthiest layers of the population and provide favorable conditions for the growth of genuine, conscious "socialistic" thinking.

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