



An Interview with ICAO U.S. Representative Ambassador Thomas Carter

Thomas Carter is the Ambassador to the U.S. Mission to ICAO and the U.S. Representative to the ICAO Council. With over 10,000 flying hours as a military and commercial pilot, he served as a military instructor and flight examiner on worldwide missions and later flew for US Airways, attaining the position of B-737 Captain. Further, he performed duties in national security positions at the highest levels within the White House, U.S. Senate, and Department of Defense.

A&SL: Please share a little background on yourself. Where did you grow up, and what influences led you down your career path?

TC: I'm a native of Memphis, Tennessee. When I was 10 years old, my uncle, who was an Air Force mechanic at the time, walked me to my first aircraft. It was a VIP version DC-3. I walked up to the cockpit, sat down in the left seat, and announced that this was the coolest thing ever. From that moment, I wanted to fly.

Another inspiration was the fact that the Memphis Belle sat outside a local National Guard armory near the fairgrounds where I played baseball as a kid. Last year, I was honored to attend the rollout of the newly renovated Belle at the Air Force Museum. In addition, one of the very first books I remember reading as a child was *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, so I have always been fascinated with the courage that mission required. Ironically, I would meet General Doolittle many years later; what a gentleman.

Finally, I was lucky enough to attend Air Force pilot training in the mid-1970s even though the service was cutting back significantly due to the Vietnam drawdown.

A&SL: You have spent a considerable amount of time in government; please tell us about your experience while in public service.

TC: I guess you can say that I've always wanted to do interesting and meaningful things. That sentiment led me to depart the active duty Air Force and become one of Senator Bob Dole's national security staff members. Participating in formulating critical policies that affect our nation's overall defense and foreign policy strategies was absolutely fascinating to me. For the remainder of my now 40-plus-year career, I have leaped in and out of government doing interesting things while also continuing to fly either in the Air Force Reserve or with US Airways.

I guess ICAO follows naturally, and it's certainly been an eye-opening learning experience.

A&SL: You have had a very impressive career. What was the best job or mission you ever had?

TC: Well, certainly the single most important job ever was to carry the "football" for President Reagan. Simply put, I'll never have greater responsibilities in any other job. While I naturally can't discuss it all in detail, when you're personally responsible for making sure that the president remains the commander in chief at all times, just imagine the pressure and judgment that such a mission requires. I had the incredible honor to be with him the day he was reelected and reinaugurated. He was incredibly easy to serve, and even to this day, when someone refers to "the president," I think first of President Reagan.

A&SL: How did you come to be appointed the U.S. Representative to ICAO?

TC: I had supported Mr. Trump as the Republican nominee and worked within the Department of Defense transition team as the Air Force lead. I was later asked by the leader of the Presidential Personnel Office to consider the ICAO position.

A&SL: What has surprised you most since your appointment?

TC: The lack of discussions on purely aviation issues. I seem to spend more time on administrative issues than anything else. Now, while this might just be a function of an Assembly year, I have also been completely shocked with the lack of transparency from the Secretariat and the outright subterfuge aimed toward the Council. I have had to literally pry information out of the staff here, and rarely do I get the complete picture. Ethics reform dominated my 2018, and whistleblower protection overshadowed half of 2019. This isn't what I expected at all.

A&SL: The ICAO Council has an interesting role; can you share a few of the more interesting issues the Council has worked on in the past year?

TC: While the Council usually passes maybe one or two actual SARPs (standards and recommended practices) per session, I would say that ICAO's audit program and CORSIA (Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme

for International Aviation) have probably been the most revealing. ICAO is fond of its “No Country Left Behind” theme, yet only two-thirds of our member states can meet two-thirds of our security standards that are already in place. I’ve even discovered that 30 percent of the countries that ICAO notified of a potential security inspection over the last two years have replied, “no thanks!” So, while the United States performs its own safety and security inspections of countries with airlines that fly directly to our country, many of these other member states could benefit from legitimate and substantive inspections from ICAO. Unfortunately, we’re simply not there yet.

CORSIA has some lofty goals to help limit our overall emissions, but it is also important in precluding many governments from unilaterally imposing their own environmental policies on the rest of the world. It remains to be seen, though, if our ICAO Council actions will placate some of these more aggressive countries.

A&SL: What are the top goals of the United States at ICAO, and what needs to happen to accomplish them? Can they be achieved?

TC: I want ICAO to focus primarily on its core missions, safety and security, and to uphold the very highest ethical standards while doing so. Unfortunately, I see ICAO starting to attempt other, more expansive and less important missions. These activities distract us from effectively executing our most important mission, which I like to say is “assuring a landing for every takeoff.” That simple phrase should guide everything we do here.

A&SL: What measures should ICAO take to effectively advance safe, secure, and efficient international aviation?

TC: ICAO needs to become a more transparent, ethical organization that can’t be dominated by any particular regional group or country. Because of a decidedly negative reputation as a place to work within the UN system, ICAO isn’t attracting the necessary talent to make it most effective. While I’m fairly happy with our air navigation and safety efforts, most of the other mission areas are lacking in deep, knowledgeable talent. ICAO had 100 open full-time positions vacant at the end of 2018. Some of these positions had been open for two or three years.

A&SL: How can U.S. airlines, manufacturers, and other industry stakeholders best support your work at ICAO?

TC: Certainly they can communicate directly with the U.S. Mission here as they do today. I believe that our contacts with industry and associations are superb, and they know that our door is always open to them. We’re here to press for our U.S. government’s aviation priorities, and our daily coordination with DOT, FAA, TSA, NTSB, and State is well known. I encourage all stakeholders to make sure that these agencies are informed of their concerns as well.

A&SL: What does the ICAO of 2044 look like to you?

TC: It will be a web-based coordination effort among countries that are integral to aviation. The entrenched bureaucracy that we face here today, with its five- to seven-year time frame to get anything done, will be extinct, as well it should be.