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FORUM: Terror in the sky

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We leave our rights behind when we enter a U.S. airplane: All passengers are treated as presumed terrorists. If we don't protect our rights, they will go away. Our government and the airlines are doing their darnedest to see that happens.

The ploy is as old as mankind. Take the Mafia, for example. First they threaten and intimidate. Then they offer protection. For a price, of course. The Nazis did that to the rich Jews. They could buy their way out. We know what happened to the rest. Communist governments "protected" their citizens by cutting down dissenters like vegetables. Or just letting them wither and die in a Gulag.

In this country, our hard fought-for rights are enshrined in the Constitution. We all grew up believing the Constitution is like a fortress. Impenetrable. Which made us feel safe. Our rights are in a secure place. Right? Wrong. Malevolent thieves have broken into the fortress.

If in doubt, think of Guantanamo Bay. Think of government's illegal domestic wiretapping. Think of government's illegal eavesdropping on our telephone calls and e-mails. Think of government searches without a warrant. Think of CIA's illegal abduction and "rendition" of suspected terrorists to foreign countries for torture. The list of constitutional violations goes on and on.

As for domestic air travelers, we are subject to government and airline abuses every day. Yet meekly and obediently, we all take off our shoes, get our laptops and boarding passes out; get frisked by people we normally would not let touch us with a 10-foot pole; have our toothpaste or shaving cream taken away. ... We let them do all that to us for the sake of "protection."

Once on board, we get treated like suspected terrorists. We leave our rights behind when we enter an airplane. Here's what happened to me on a recent American Airlines flight from New York to Chicago.

We were about 30 minutes into a one hour, 45 minute flight. The captain had turned off the "fasten seat belts" sign, and announced it was OK to move about the cabin. The young man seated in the window seat next to me asked if I would let him step out to get something out of his bag. I did.

I stood back between the first class and the main cabin, looking out the windows. Suddenly, I heard someone shout, "*sit down.*" And again, for added emphasis, "*sit down.*" It was the flight attendant, standing behind a cart about 20 feet up the cabin in front of the cockpit.

The young man sheepishly sat down. As I went back to my seat, I saluted the rude flight

attendant and said, "Yes, Sergeant Major!"

It turned out that one of the flight crew members was in the restroom. Guess there must be some new government regulation that requires passengers to be seated while the captain is in the john? And this bull mastiff of a flight attendant and her cart are supposed to guard the cockpit from suspected terrorists, such as the young man and myself?

"That's all fine and dandy, but that's no way to talk to a passenger," I said. "How about some politeness?"

"I am here to keep you safe," she declared pompously.

Seeing that it was a waste of time trying to talk sensibly to her, I said I would report her rude behavior to the American Airlines.

That was it. A verbal exchange that lasted less than a minute.

A few minutes before landing in Chicago, the flight attendant came over and handed me a piece of paper titled "Notice — Your Behavior May Be in Violation of Federal Law." The flight attendant had underlined the words, "*threatening, intimidating or interfering with a flight crew member* (Federal Regulation 91.11). I felt as if I were getting a ticket from a police officer.

When I stepped out of the airplane, I was met by two American Airlines agents. One held a piece of paper in her hands. "So what happened up there?" she said. "What do you mean 'what happened?'"

"Well, the flight attendant filed this report in which she said you had refused to sit down and had threatened her."

I was flabbergasted. I was being falsely accused and framed for something I had not done because the flight attendant evidently realized her job may be in jeopardy after I write to American Airlines.

I explained what did happen. The two ladies seemed satisfied and let me go.

Before I left the gate area, I was met by another uniformed American Airlines official. He said he was with an American Airlines Customer Relations agent. He was holding the same piece of paper. He was sympathetic.

"You should never do that," he counseled me after he'd heard my account of what had happened. "Up there in the air, they have absolute power. And this piece of paper goes to the FAA [Federal Aviation Authority]. You should have waited to land and then complain to us about the flight attendant."

"But I did wait," I said. "I was now going to go to the Admirals Club and write a complaint letter. The flight attendant evidently launched a pre-emptive strike against me, trying to frame me and protect herself."

After about 10 to 15 minutes the American Airlines agents let me go. And I did write a letter.

Three days later, I received a letter of apology. The airline said its supervisory personnel have dealt appropriately with the rude flight attendant, and hoped I would continue to fly with them.

American Airlines' corrective action was swift and just. But other issues about our rights violations remain. We don't want protection at the expense of our rights. We must stay vigilant in defending them. This is an example of how that sometimes pays off. It should encourage us to do it more often.

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