

## **“OPINION: IF AIR RAGE IS OUT OF CONTROL, BLAME MANAGEMENT”**

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**By Bob Ross – President of the Association of Professional Flight Attendants.**

A few days ago, I was meeting with union representatives at the Association of Professional Flight Attendants. We were collecting facts about an incident aboard a San Francisco-to-Dallas flight involving a flight attendant, a stroller and an irate passenger in the first-class cabin. During our meeting, I received a report of a flight attendant on a flight from Sydney to Los Angeles who had been grabbed by the throat by a passenger. The same week, a flight attendant emailed to describe seats on her flight littered with garbage and the words “F— You Bitch” found glued to the aircraft window in cutout letters. The same week, the American Airlines Facebook page received a number of death threats directed at flight attendants. I receive similar reports of air rage every day.

### **Do you think, just maybe, this is getting out of hand?**

It was not always this way. When I began working as a flight attendant 34 years ago, the job was about service, safety and maximizing the flying experience. Our 26,000 flight-attendant members at American Airlines still strive to make flying comfortable and enjoyable. But since 9/11 my colleagues and I have become first responders, the last line of defense, concerned about security and safety in a cabin when tensions run high.

When you combine tight schedules, overcrowded aircraft and shrinking seats with less pitch and limited overhead bin space, you have a recipe for frustration. Factors such as overbooked flights—as we recently witnessed in a passenger removal on a United Airlines flight—add to the tension. Everyone is put on edge by pressure to get airplanes out on time, such as the “Departure minus 10 min.” and American’s “Optimizer” computer program, which calculates the minimum optimum amount of time that airplanes can be on the ground and erases any margin for error. The slightest delay causes a trickle effect for every flight down the line. All these stresses are related to corporate decisions beyond the control of passengers or flight attendants.

These metal tubes that we fly in have become like capsules housing hundreds of passengers with different needs, wants and cultures in an extremely confined space. We have packed the aircraft with seats but drained them of every amenity. Flying is no longer a pleasant experience for most of our customers, but it doesn’t have to be this way.

Now that the industry is enjoying record profits, it is time to give back and think about finding ways to make flying less stressful and more comfortable. Perhaps we should focus on the quality of our on-time departure to start out with a better experience for everyone. Let’s do a better job of making sure large bags and cumbersome items do not make it down the boarding bridge by staffing to meet the needs of everyone.

Let’s put the human element into scheduling for passengers and build more time into schedules for crew rest and connections. We should staff flights with more flight attendants, rather than sticking with the minimum government mandates. Most importantly, we must value flight

attendants, compensate them fairly and recognize that they play a larger role today in an airline's success or failure than they ever have.

American took a step in the right direction at the end of April, after pressure from our union, when it granted raises on top of earlier salary adjustments, outside of the normal collective-bargaining process, to be competitive with its peers. But when inflation is taken into account, even these increases do not bring us back to the wage rates flight attendants earned prior to 9/11.

Derek Thompson, writing in *The Atlantic* magazine this month in an article entitled "How Flight Attendants Are Set-Up To Fail," identified two major trends: "the airlines' corporate power to maximize profits from each flight, and fliers' power to broadcast their frustration on social media when tensions boil over," such as we witnessed recently with the viral videos of a Delta Air Lines passenger denied access to a restroom.

It is going to be hard to stop viral videos, but CEOs of the air carriers can use their power to improve the flying experience. If they do not, the government is likely to step in and do it for them.