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The Blame Game

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Dear CEOs of U.S. airlines:

I want to say thanks for the July 10 email you sent to all your customers seeking to explain why today's air travel experience is so painful. The letter, signed by 12 of you, explained that "oil speculators" -- presumably by betting on future oil prices -- are killing your industry and thus requested that I, as a consumer, pressure Congress to rein in this "unchecked" market "manipulation."

I admit that just lately I'd begun to feel that flying was something akin to having my intestines fished out with a long hook. Actually, I'd been wondering whom to blame for the fact that it would probably be cheaper, easier and maybe even faster to drive to wherever I want to go than to board one of your planes. Suddenly, all is clear.

I now understand that it is oil speculators who set your hiring policies and who must have outlined the three types of people you may employ: those who grunt at me, those who sigh deeply as if my presence has ruined their day and those who are actively hostile to my smallest request.

I'm betting those speculators at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange were behind the retention of that counter agent who recently placed me, my 3-year-old and my infant in completely different rows for a cross-country flight, instructing me to "sort it out at the gate." The CME undoubtedly also hired the gate agent who told me to "fix it on the plane." Ditto the stewardess who yelled at me for not dealing with this problem before I boarded and then ordered a dozen people to shift seats, delaying our departure. Not that it mattered, since we sat on the runway for two hours. But it's good to know what donkey I can pin that tail on.

I now know that it was conniving commodity traders who have been losing my bags for the past two decades. Hey, you know what? It was probably some stressed-out oil jockey who in the late 1990s "relieved" my bag of that fifth of bourbon my parents gave me. Thieving, drunken futures traders, the lot of them!

I now understand why, right before Christmas, I and a dozen other passengers showed up at the gate to be informed that the airline had overbooked our flight and that we might not make it home for the holiday. I realize now that an airline -- which is in the business of getting people where they need to go -- would never be so inept (greedy?) as to double-sell its seats at one of the busiest times of the year. Only some good-for-nothing oil trader would be that low.

Speaking of logistics, I'm also relieved to find out that it was not you but the oil-futures business that lobbied to get rid of air-traffic restrictions at a busy airport like LaGuardia, thus leading to national gridlock. The next time I'm baking on a New York runway and the captain tells me that we're "25th for takeoff" for my "short hop" to Washington, I'll be sure to blame the New York Mercantile Exchange.

Whoa. It just hit me. Maybe Nymex is also running the Transportation Security Administration! Up to now, I'd figured that only a government bureaucrat had the creativity to come with those requirements about toiletries in sandwich bags and to design the maze at Dulles Airport that makes me think I am approaching the security gate when in fact I am two hours away. But now that I consider the matter, those speculators are pretty smart. And since their purpose in life is to scam Americans, it all makes sense.

I feel so much better knowing that it was the Intercontinental Exchange that negotiated the airline labor contracts, promising packages you couldn't afford, ratcheting up the stakes until you finally went bankrupt and then left me, the taxpayer, holding the bag. And, phew, am I glad to find out you weren't involved in that underhanded attempt to keep Virgin from starting a new low-cost carrier here. Only a dying industry would sic the government on a rival instead of honestly competing for business. And that's just not you, is it?

And I'm beginning to get why the only way I can use my frequent-flier miles is if I agree to travel to Chattanooga, Tenn., in October 2011. Those oil-futures guys, they're tricky. I'm betting they've got some futures-hedge-put-short-thingy placed so that they will make a bundle if I touch down in that city a few years hence. Never underestimate the long con.

I have only one question: What the heck happened with Southwest? I seem to remember back in 2005, as oil prices were rising, Southwest used the oil market to "hedge" its fuel supply, locking in lower costs that gave it a competitive edge. Oh, now I get it. Southwest totally used the market to its advantage. Ha, ha. I bet those speculators are still beating themselves with flight manuals over that one.

Anyway, I'm looking forward to the day when you shut down oil markets, whatever the cost to the economy. Then I will expect to arrive at a gleaming airport, where I will be greeted by a chipper employee and quickly shuffled through security, where I will take off and land on time and be handed an unrifled bag. After all, you will have no more excuses.

Hopefully yours . . .

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