

New Seat Tax Takes Flight

By Reg P. Wydeven
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In the winter of 2005, my wife and I and our then two-year-old and our four-month-old flew to Naples, Florida, to visit my wife's parents for a week. On this voyage, I stared fear in the face – and I blinked. It would be years before I had the courage to fly again.

My folks dropped us off at the airport and our flight to Detroit went off without a hitch. Foolishly, I thought the whole trip would be uneventful. However, when trying to catch our connecting flight, I knew I was in trouble when I noticed my wife's new ski jacket was just a pink speck in the horizon. Apparently she and the four-month-old didn't believe in the Marine Corps' motto to never leave a man behind.

Surprisingly, I was falling behind because I was lugging the two-year-old, her car seat, two diaper bags, two winter coats, a camera case, a laptop computer, and a 137-pound carry-on bag. By the grace of God, we made the connection. My fellow passengers didn't seem thrilled to see me as I stumbled down the narrow aisle, drenched in sweat, inadvertently smacking them in the head with my numerous bags. Had I been in better shape, I wouldn't have looked like a wet t-shirt competition contestant.

I put the two-year-old in the seat next to the window and I sat in the middle. Much to my dismay, a man the size of a professional wrestler came ambling down the aisle and I just knew he would be sitting next to me. Sure enough, he plopped down next to me, wedging me into the armrest between my daughter and I, causing indescribable pain to my innards.

Feeling like a passenger in a clown car, it was an uncomfortable trip. If we had the same experience on a United Airlines flight today, my neighbor would also have an uncomfortable flight. According to United's new policy, oversized passengers will be forced to purchase two seats if they can't fit comfortably into one and there are no other seats available.

United Airlines released a statement claiming the new policy "was created for the comfort and well-being of all our guests on board, and is in response to the 700 complaints received last year from customers who did not have a comfortable flight because the person next to them infringed on their seat."

The policy is aimed at people who cannot fit in a single seat. United will charge a passenger if he or she cannot close the arm rest or cannot fasten the seat belt with an extension. Obviously, civil rights advocates are claiming the policy unfairly discriminates against overweight people.

The man sitting next to me had about 5% body fat – he wasn't overweight, he was just a big dude. Accordingly, I wasn't about to complain and I certainly don't envy the airline person who would have to tell him he has to buy two tickets.

Movie theaters and other public places have learned to accommodate bigger customers. However, the airlines, who are struggling financially, need to jam as many passengers onto a flight as possible and bigger seats means less people.

It will be interesting to see if United rescinds its policy in response to the discrimination claims. I hope the airlines just make bigger seats. If not, after four years, my spleen is finally back to where it's supposed to be, so I'm ready for another cramped flight.