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—Allen H. Neuharth  
Chairman and Founder  
Sept. 15, 1982

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# OPINION

## The Debate: SMOKE IN THE SKIES

Today's debate includes our opinion that smoking on all domestic airline flights should be banned, opposing views from Texas and the District of Columbia, other views from Minnesota and Texas, and voices from across the USA.

### BRENNAN DAWSON MORAN An opposing view

# Ban on smoking is just a smokescreen

WASHINGTON — Airline passengers have been told they're in for further disappointments. Now there's an airline that not only ranks among the worst for consumer complaints but says it is no longer interested in providing a desired service. Northwest Airlines announced a new marketing ploy of shunning smoking passengers by banning smoking. Unfortunately for smokers and non-smokers alike, this gimmick is nothing but a smokescreen.

Consumer complaints filed against Northwest with the Department of Transportation rose a staggering 1,418%, from 1986 to 1987. The airline's own reports to the government between September and January place it consistently near the bottom for on-time performance. January records indicate Northwest flights arrived on time only 61.6% of the time.

In other areas, Northwest fares just as poorly. According to summaries of 1987 performance, Northwest received the second most passenger complaints, falling at or near the bottom for delays or cancellations, overbookings, lost and damaged luggage and other aspects of customer service.

Since complaints to Northwest about smoking represent less than 3% of all these problems, it's clear Northwest has chosen to address only a small portion of passenger concerns — or it has turned a blind eye to those issues.

By banning smoking on all flights, Northwest goes beyond a new federal law prohibiting smoking on flights of two hours or less. Northwest surpassed not only the new law but also a Transportation Department call for scientific investigation before banning smoking on air-

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lines.

The department is readying a comprehensive study of airline cabin air quality, including tobacco smoke. This study is an outgrowth of a 1986 National Academy of Sciences report which noted, "Empirical evidence is lacking in quality and quantity." The report added: "The dearth of pertinent data limits conclusions about the potential for adverse health effects to no more than estimates. Much more research must be conducted before risks can be accurately measured." Ironically, the panel then called for a smoking ban.

Since 1971, four major in-flight tests of tobacco smoke by both federal and private researchers have concluded the amount of cigarette smoke detected in actual commercial flights is extremely small, posing no demonstrated risk to non-smoking passengers or flight personnel. The most recent study, published in *Environmental Science and Technology* in October, found levels of tobacco smoke that "indicate that average exposures are orders of magnitude less than exposures represented by smoking a single cigarette."

Northwest's pattern of disregard for expressly stated passenger desires and scientific findings may have gained a few headlines, but it does nothing to attract customers. To accomplish this, Northwest will have to address the abundance of consumer complaints. Smokers, fortunately, have alternative airlines that welcome their business and, if the federal complaint record is any indication, provide better service.

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