

The drive for smoke-free skies

BY AHRON LEICHTMAN

Guest Columnist

The modern-day version of the Flat Earth Society is at it again. This time the Tobacco Institute is attempting to convince the U.S. Senate not to ban smoking on all flights of less than two hours — a measure that was passed by the Civil Aeronautics Board in May, 1984, only to be rescinded a few hours later, allegedly following political pressure.

More than three years later, the shockwave felt by the cigarette companies is immediate and the political pressure just as strong when the House voted recently to ban smoking on flights less than two hours. Jesse Helms has announced his plans to filibuster the issue in the Senate. The Tobacco Institute is gathering its troops to gear up for the biggest battle yet in the anti-smoking war.

Protection needed

Some real protection from exposure to tobacco smoke in the airliner cabin is needed for the 450 million people who are expected to travel by air this year. The nation's 90,000 flight attendants suffer most of all. Three federal reports on involuntary smoking issued within a five-month period last year proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that it is dangerous to passively breathe a smoker's smoke.

When you consider the fact that nine out of 10 smokers say they want to quit and an overwhelming majority of people who smoke choose to sit in a non-smoking section on an airplane, you begin to see why banning smoking in-flight will be a big spike driven into the coffin of the tobacco industry. It is tantamount to saying that innocent people suffer and are harmed by tobacco smoke. That's why the Tobacco Institute has set out to convince senators not to include language for a two-hour in-flight smoking ban in the transportation appropriations bill for fiscal 1988. The facts it is citing are as believable as one might expect coming from the public-relations arm of the lung-cancer industry.

Most U.S. senators realize by now that the "institute" has little if any credibility. It is naive to suggest that an industry that produces an addictive product that kills nearly half a million Americans every year would be truthful about any harm associated with tobacco use. For example, the institute says some of its "research" indicates that more than 3,800 chemicals contained in tobacco smoke, including 84 known carcinogens, aren't as harmful as health authorities have indicated. Believing that could be harmful to your health.

While it is recognized that we have only scratched the surface in determining all of the adverse health effects of involuntary smoking, what we do know precludes any denial that exposure to second-hand smoke can be harmful. There is growing public acceptance of restrictions on smoking in public places. The benefits of a smoke-free environment are becoming increasingly apparent as the federal government, the military, most states and many of the nation's top companies have limited smoking in various locations. Some have even banned it altogether. The airlines are next in line and they are resisting it because they have been duped into believing the unbelievable.

The Tobacco Institute has cited an Airline Pilots Association poll that purportedly shows that 87% of pilots favor the current separation policy. *No such poll was ever taken* of all airline pilots. In November, 1986, the association polled its airline pilot chairmen (delegates) on cockpit smoking and they decided on a voluntary smoking ban in the cockpit. The association didn't ask pilots about a total ban, three-hour ban, two-hour ban or the current policy that exists in the airliner cabin. While individual pilots overwhelmingly favor a total smoking ban, the association, in fact, opposes the proposed legislation on the grounds of safety — apparently believing the tobacco lobby which says some smokers would be apt to sneak into the lavatory to light up. If the product is that addictive, what we need is an addiction warning on the label and nicotine substitutes for people who need

it when they fly. If addicted smokers can cause fires in airplane lavatories, let's ban airline smoking altogether, install tamper-proof smoke detectors with loud alarms and propose criminal penalties to deal with offenders who would dare to jeopardize the health and safety of all passengers and crews.

As the situation now stands, a significant segment of the flying public suffers discomfort and illness in order to avail themselves of the most convenient and rapid form of intercity public transportation, and a smaller segment of the population — people with cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and allergies — is denied access altogether because of a life-threatening or a debilitating condition.

Reasons for a ban

In addition to the passive-smoking issue, there are other reasons why in-flight smoking should be banned. The accumulation of tobacco smoke also affects delicate airline equipment. Safety, therefore, becomes an issue. News reports document that the following incidents have occurred and continue to occur in the airliner cabin: oxygen masks fail to drop in ground tests due to their matting surfaces being glued shut by tobacco tars; congealed tar and nicotine become frozen to flight-control cables; outflow valves malfunction; in-flight fires occur; burned clothing and hands caused by careless smoking; captains leaving the cockpit to referee disputes over smoking or to help flight attendants look for dropped cigarettes between or beneath seats.

Smoking in flight threatens everyone. Congress should take immediate action to end it now.

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