

Other Viewpoints

Airline hostages freed at long last

A hostage situation of sorts is about to be resolved, and not any too soon.

Federal transportation officials issued an order requiring airlines to let passengers off of airplanes delayed on the ground for more than three hours. Air carriers who fail to comply will face fines of up to \$27,500 per passenger.

The new rule, scheduled to go into effect in April, is a relief.

It's also long overdue.

For years, we've heard horror stories of passengers trapped aboard jets for hours without food, water and restrooms.

All the while, travelers hoped common sense or basic human compassion would be enough to prompt the airlines to take action.

It didn't happen. Not by a long shot.

Earlier this year, the situation came to a head when 47 passengers aboard a jet in Rochester, Minn., got stuck for six hours overnight. It was a nightmarish scene: children wailing, no food and water, bathrooms overfilled on the tiny "regional jet."

The debacle led to a \$175,000 fine against three airlines involved. And now comes the new rule.

Thank goodness the federal government did something.

Under the rule, which applies to all domestic flights, food and water must be provided to passengers after delays of two hours. Restroom facilities must be provided as well.

Airlines resisted the rule, saying it will result in more canceled flights and other travel problems. Carriers argued that long delays are relatively rare.

True, but such waits have affected hundreds of thousands of travelers in the last few years.

And until the new rule goes into effect, as one consumer advocate put it, passengers stuck on the ground have fewer rights than a prisoner of war under the Geneva Conventions.

While POWs are entitled to fair treatment with food, water and facilities, the advocate said, "There is nothing required by the airlines to provide for airline passengers. Nothing."

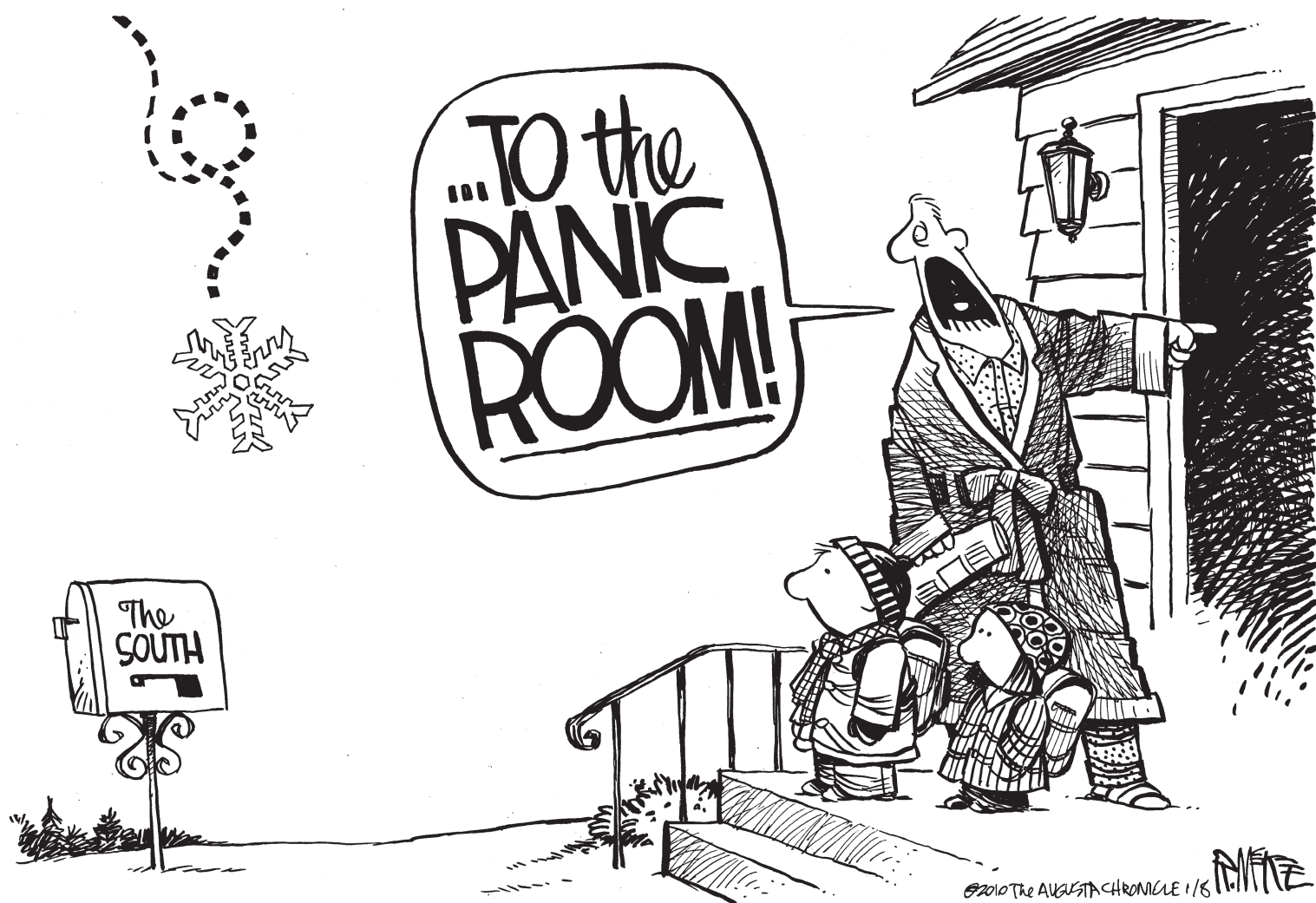
So government intervention surely was warranted.

Now it's time to see whether federal officials will back up this get-tough policy.

There's some leeway in the rule, including a provision allowing passengers to be kept aboard if the pilot determines safety or security prevent them deplaning. The \$27,500 fine is a maximum, meaning airlines could get off for less.

But the order was a good first step.

— *The Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press*



The bottom line is not the best value

Kansas, like the United States at large, has a shortage of engineers, nuclear physicists, physicians and math and science teachers.

Oddly enough, some state legislators as well as business-minded administrators want to shut down the very programs that train such specialists. The reason: only a small number of students are pursuing those careers. Save money by canceling programs with small enrollments, they reason.

This line of reasoning is simple-minded for several reasons.

- Treating a student as a "customer" leaves the curriculum in the hands of the pop culture. During the era of Jacques Cousteau, many students wanted to become marine biologists. Today, the CSI television program has brought in enough students wanting to enter forensic science to staff police departments several times over. And there is always a stadium full of students ready to become athletic trainers.

- At universities, our job has been and continues to be broadening these students' options and helping them train for a realistic world and the jobs that Kansas needs. A university that is whipsawed by every career fad cannot sustain stable programs and quality faculty.

- Cutting all low-enrolled programs assumes that there will be savings. In recent years, no Kansas educational institution has turned out enough chemistry or physics teachers to make a five-graduates-a-year threshold. Shut down all of the chemistry and physics teacher programs and you save — nothing.



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

Those chemistry and physics professors are still needed to serve their nonteaching majors as well as nursing, pre-med, biology and general education programs. University programs across the state may only be turning out one physics or chemistry teacher every other year, but Kansas desperately needs that physics or chemistry teacher.

- Administrators who defend cutting all small programs on a mindless bean-counting formula can say they are running a business. But a good business would fire them — because it is not good business practice.

Take that big discount store — you know the one. They stock some shelves with product that has very low turnover — not a "profit maker." But they know that if they discontinue that product due to low sales, that forces the customer to go elsewhere.

The equivalent situation for colleges is that a student who enters with one career goal often switches to another. On average, over 60 percent change majors. Kansas needs chemistry and physics teachers, and if a student decides to switch from another field, those programs

need to be there to recruit and capture them.

Sadly, CEO or "Chief Executive Officer" seems to be the moniker used for both university presidents and even administrators of large public schools. The model for the last decade has been to run schools like a business. Like the movie character who proclaimed "greed is good," administrators now say enrollment is the "bottom line," and we are rapidly moving toward discount universities.

Public schools and universities are not here to serve student "customers," but to serve the people of the state of Kansas—to serve the "public good." To drive school policy based on career fads does not serve Kansas or the student well. We will end up with far more (unemployed) crime scene investigators and athletic trainers than Kansas will ever need, and no nuclear physicists or chemistry teachers. The blame for such shortages falls squarely on the heads of those who treat public education as a business.

There may be under-enrolled university programs that can be eliminated to save money, but they are not in chemistry or physics or science teaching.

But CEO's, board members, and legislators who never use the words "public good" — now those are good candidates for elimination.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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Is American agriculture ending?

The end of agriculture in America is near. American agriculture will soon lose its competitive edge.

The high cost of producing food here, compared with the cost in other countries, is pushing American farmers out of business as competitors around the world develop enough to serve the same markets. Overseas producers with lower input costs will increasingly be able to undersell American farmers.

Other major factors that will change the face of American agriculture include energy shortages, exhausted land and limited water resources.

Opponents of today's agriculture suggest stripping away the romance and nostalgia surrounding agriculture and seeing it for what it is — a business. They argue it's a business with limited potential for long-term profits because of its competitive nature.

Look at the big picture, they say. The whole world can produce crops in 2010.

But in America, the cost of feeding hungry mouths around the world has risen to the point where it is not profitable compared with alternative types of businesses. Thus, the people, money and other resources invested in agriculture currently will be forced to leave for greener pastures.

Are these startling new revelations or are they predictions of those totally out of touch with the business of farming and ranching?

Critics of American agriculture contend that crop yields will not keep up with population growth. Some predict by the year 2050, arable American farmland will decrease by nearly 200 million acres.

They also say water will become scarcer



John Schlageck

• Insights
Kansas Farm Bureau

for agriculture, forcing a shift of farming to regions where rainfall is plentiful. Marginal rainfall regions like the western half of Kansas, eastern Colorado and the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas may be destined to revert back to grassland.

Should this happen, the United States will cease to be a food exporter. Our new diet will contain less meat and dairy products, more grains and beans and a sparser array of vegetables.

It is hard for farmers and ranchers to stomach such predictions especially at this point in history when American agriculture remains the envy of the world.

There is no doubt agriculture, like the rest of the U.S. economy, will continue to face challenges. True, this country is already affected by higher input costs, dwindling avenues of trade and the constant wrath of Mother Nature.

In spite of these challenges, farmers and ranchers remain dedicated to staying on the land and continuing in their chosen vocation. They, better than anyone, understand the land they depend on for their livelihood is finite.

Care for this critical resource continues to improve. Today's farmers are increasing the organic matter in their soil. With the continuing practice of no-till and reduced tillage farm-

ing, farmers continue to build organic matter and improve the soil tilth. There is no reason to think this practice will be discontinued.

New and improved crop varieties are continually coming down the pike. Production practices continue to evolve and improve.

As for the question of scarce water, this is always a major concern in farm and ranch country. Producers constantly chart rainfall amounts and monitor weather conditions. In Kansas, farmers are aware of changes in the Ogallala Aquifer.

They are tuned into water and the conservation of this vital resource. Some, especially in the western half of the state, are concerned about the potential of long-term climate change. If such a phenomenon should occur, there is the possibility Kansas could become more arid — more like New Mexico, for example.

Barring a major shift in our climate, crops will continue to be planted in western Kansas. Production could be less, but this land will be farmed and farmed wisely.

Without question, today's crop of agricultural detractors raises some interesting possibilities. But American agriculture is up to the task. This country has the minds, machinery and dedication to continue producing food for people around the globe.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

