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## **Flying the Regulated Skies** **by Scott McPherson**

If ever there was cause to believe that the government is not competent to dictate airport and airline security, the recent arrest of a pilot for trying to carry a pistol onto his flight should confirm that suspicion. It also shows again why security ought to be left to individual airlines and airports — in short, to the free market — rather than to government bureaucracies.

On the morning of January 21, Northwest Airlines pilot Robert Donaldson was walking through a baggage-screening area in New York's LaGuardia Airport when airport officials found a 9mm Taurus semi-automatic in his carry-on luggage. Donaldson is now facing three state counts of criminal possession of a weapon and up to 15 years in prison. He has a permit to carry his gun in Michigan.

This case drives to the heart of everything that's wrong with centralized control. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Americans have been clamoring for greater security on commercial airline flights. Rather than adapting to changing demand procedures and innovating and developing better security arrangements on their own, however, airlines are in the uncomfortable position of having to answer to government dictates on proper security.

Of course, apologists for government regulation would argue that it's just commonsense to forbid the carrying of weapons on planes. The trouble with that argument, however, is that Robert Donaldson was the *pilot* of the plane he was trying to board. If he was bent on a suicide and mass murder, he didn't need a gun to accomplish his mission. Perhaps we should be more forgiving: commonsense is not the government's strong suit.

Possessing a firearm is the greatest deterrent against potential aggression. Most Americans can see the utility of handguns in combating crime, but somehow there is a disconnect when the same argument is raised in favor of arming pilots. Maybe they're right. Maybe pilots shouldn't be allowed to have guns. But if that is truly the "will of the people," then get the government and its bureaucracies out of the way; let airlines answer that question for themselves, and individual passengers will decide what makes them feel safer — by a vote at the ticket counter.

Robert Donaldson does not deserve to go to prison. His decision to take a gun on his flight

(assuming it was intentional and not accidental) is between him and his employer. Any “discipline” he may receive should be at the discretion of Northwest Airlines, not the state of New York.

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