---

## Ask the pilot

### Tedium in the age of terror: 9/11, Martin Amis and the real legacy of Mohamed Atta.

**By Patrick Smith**

Nov. 14, 2008 |

A pair of rebuttals to get things going:

Last week's column -- an open letter to the president-elect, outlining six things he should do to improve air travel -- drew about 50 letters to the editor. One of them came from a reader called "heyja." He (we'll assume it's a he) begins by agreeing with me that airline delays are mostly the result of the overzealous scheduling practices of the airlines themselves, not air traffic control shortcomings, but then levies a couple of odd, somewhat contemptuous allegations at pilots.

"Add to the whiners," he writes "those pilots who absolutely refuse to fly into any precipitation during departure and en-route, whether it's a level one shower or a cloud ... But they'll burst through a level six thunderstorm to land. Figure that out."

Well, I would be happy to try, save for the fact I have no idea what he's talking about. I fly all the time, seeing how it's my job, and I am unaware of pilots who, as a matter of routine, avoid innocuous rain showers. Why would they? Neither would any sane pilot "burst through" any sort of thunderstorm, in any phase of flight, let alone a Level 6 (those being the scariest, most powerful kind) on landing. There might be a few readers out there who came across this letter and wondered if perhaps heyja was privy to some scandalous goings-on among air crews. Believe me, he is not. If your flight is diverting around weather, it's to spare you from uncomfortable turbulence. And no pilot will knowingly fly through a thunderstorm.

But wait, he goes on. "Most of the time," says heyja, "pilots will push the seats back, push a button, never look out the window, arranging their Jeppsens [sic], drink their coffee, whine about the Democrats and their disappearing pensions."

"Jeppesens" is a reference to the name of the company that publishes the navigation charts carried by pilots in those mysterious black bags. And he's partly right about the whining. But as for the rest ... Yes, that's what we do up there, we "push a button." Flying, of course, is so automated nowadays that even a 12-year-old with a handful of hours at a desktop simulator could find his way from New York to China in a 747, or handle a Category II Instrument Landing System approach with a failed engine. No problem.

Or so some would have it. Here we go yet again with the insufferable contention that flying jetliners is somehow easy. Apart from the related notion maintaining that all airline pilots earn obscene six-figure incomes, this is possibly the most aggravating and infernally tenacious of all aviation-related myths.

Compare, for a moment, an airline flight with a medical procedure. That's as good an analogy as any, I think. I propose that in order to deliver an airplane safely to its destination, the knowledge and expertise required of the pilot are roughly equivalent to those required of a surgeon in order to safely perform an operation. Doctors and pilots both reap the benefits of advanced technology. It makes their jobs easier. Albeit not easy, and in no way does it diminish the requisite skill, knowledge, experience and responsibility.

If you think I'm exaggerating the difficulty of flying planes, then I invite you to spend a couple of hours with me in the simulator, where I'd be happy to show you some of the limitless nuances involved in getting a plane from A to B, and demonstrate the complexities of even the most "automatic" procedure. (And if you're dumb enough to feel that way about medicine, grab a scalpel and have at it. Avoid those troublesome deductibles with some do-it-yourself surgery.)

More important quibbles:

In a different letter to the editor, Patrick999 responds to my proposal to do away with Transportation Security Administration screening for sharp objects: "While I agree in principle," he writes, "it does make me feel slightly safer knowing that no one on the plane is carrying a knife or other obvious pointy object."

I disagree that how a passenger "feels" should have any bearing on which tactics we employ, but more important, you *don't* know whether anyone on the plane is carrying a dangerous sharp. There are ceramic knives, high-tech plastic knives, etc., all of which are undetectable to the magnetic walk-through stations we have in place. The X-ray machine is just as easily foiled. Any idiot could devise a foldable, collapsible or otherwise cleverly concealed weapon invisible to the screener's eye.

Above and beyond that, a makeshift knife can be fashioned from any number of objects found on an airplane: a shattered bottle or plate, a broken-off piece of molding, you name it. Wrap some duct tape around the "handle" and there you go, a knife.

Not that the perpetrator could do anything with it. Five steps up the aisle and he'd be pummeled.

And that -- our new set of presumptions and expectations about a hijacking -- is the key. Hunting for sharps as a means of averting terror is a waste of time, period, because the hijack paradigm has changed forever. It was changed even before the fourth airplane, United 93, crashed on Sept. 11.

I've made this point in earlier columns. I'm unsure if repetition compensates for lack of eloquence, so this time I'll refer you to the words of Martin Amis. In an essay titled "Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind," Amis understands that the scheme employed on Sept. 11 became instantly unrepeatable:

"Indeed, the tactic was obsolete by 10:00 a.m. the same morning. Its efficacy lasted for seventy-one minutes, from 8:46, when American 11 hit the North Tower, to 9:57, and the start of the rebellion on United 93. On United 93, the passengers were told about the new reality by their mobile phones, and they didn't linger long in the old paradigm -- the four-day siege on the equatorial tarmac, the diminishing supplies of food and water, the festering toilets, the phased release of the children and the women ..."

Well put. "Terror and Boredom" appears in Amis' most recent book, "The Second Plane," a collection of his writings about the attacks of Sept. 11 and the subsequent unraveling of American foreign policy.

It would be plenty fair to put Martin Amis on a very short list of America's most talented writers -- if only he weren't British. He does a masterly job of dissecting our nation's geopolitical foibles, and "The Second Plane" is a definitive manifesto of all things Sept. 11 -- if not by virtue of analysis, then certainly by artistry of language. It includes the unforgettable short story "The Last Days of Mohammed Atta," a spooky fictionalization of the lead hijacker's final hours on earth.

I like "The Second Plane" so much that I will abstain from harping on the author's various, but ultimately unimportant technical gaffes. The only one that really bites at me is the statement that American 11, bearing down on the North Tower, was flying so low over Manhattan that it needed to climb in order to clear the arch in Washington Square Park. That's just silly.

Also, passengers on domestic flights are not subject to the "Have your bags been with you at all times?" interview session prior to check-in. The plane that hit the Pentagon was a 757, not a 767, and unless one is riding in a 1940s propliner, it does not take 10 hours to fly nonstop from Washington, D.C., to Heathrow. Neither does it take 10 more hours to reach Kuwait City from there. Who fact-checks these things?

Sorry, can't help myself.

As Amis sees things, it was the impact of United Airlines Flight 175 into the South Tower -- the literal second plane -- that became the "defining moment" of Sept. 11. "Until then," he writes, "America thought she was witnessing nothing more serious than the worst aviation disaster in history; now she had a sense of the fantastic vehemence raged against her. That second plane looked eagerly alive, and galvanized with malice, and wholly alien ... For us, its glint was the worldflash of a coming future."

Not quite, I think. In my mind, that threshold wasn't crossed until the collapse of the South Tower (then underscored, not that it needed to be, by the eventual fall of the North). Had the towers not fallen, I suspect our Sept. 11 hangover, which rages to this day, might not have been so prolonged. Indeed the architects of the attacks didn't expect them to, necessarily. From my own book, "Ask the Pilot":

"As I stand awestruck in this shit-hole airport restaurant in South Carolina, the television shows the towers of the World Trade Center. They are not just afire, not just shedding debris and pouring out oil-black smoke. They are *falling down*. Had the airplanes crashed, blown up, and reduced the upper halves of those buildings to burned-out hulks, the whole event would nonetheless have clung to the realm of believability. But it was the collapse -- the groaning implosions and the pyroclastic tornadoes whipping through the canyons of lower Manhattan -- that catapulted the event from ordinary disaster to pure historical infamy. The sight of those ugly, magnificent towers collapsing onto themselves is the most sublimely terrifying thing I have ever seen."

The most astute and interesting part of Amis' book, though, is his discussion of the relationship between terrorism and tedium. "Terror and boredom are very old friends," Amis writes. "The other face of the coin of Islamist terror is boredom." This is an interplay, a consequence, that we rarely acknowledge.

Think about it: the long lines, searches and pat-downs, color-coded alerts and the litany of inconvenient rules and protocols we now follow -- all this mind-numbing nonsense in the name of security.

He doesn't mean it exactly that way. "When I refer to the age of boredom," he explains, "I am not thinking of airport queues and subway searches. I mean the global confrontation with the dependent mind." Well, all right, as an intellectual that's your duty. But *what about* those airport queues?

Of all of modern life's many rituals, none are marinated in boredom so much as air travel. Writing in Salon, I do what I can to kindle an appreciation for the act of zipping through the troposphere at hundreds of miles per hour, but I can't argue that the experience isn't often a chore. "Flying" is what we call it. How misleading. We don't fly so much as sit and stand around for interminable amounts of time. Nowhere is this endured more painfully, need I point out, than at the security line. Millions of people collectively spend millions of man-hours each day, waiting in queues to have their belongings scrutinized, in a serial of meaningless pomp, by a lackey in a blue shirt and a phony badge, whose primary job it is to confiscate nondangerous items.

More than any clash of civilizations, tedium is the legacy of Mohamed Atta. And we're stuck with it, I fear, at least for the foreseeable future. The legacy of that palindromic Egyptian killer cannot be easily undone, even by the fresh thinking and clearheaded sensibilities (so it seems) of our newest president-elect. The terrorists have won, goes the refrain, and we can say that much. It isn't quite what they *hoped* to win, but they've won it nevertheless.

- - - - - - - - - - - -

Do you have questions for Salon's aviation expert? Contact Patrick Smith through his Web site and look for answers in a future column.

**-- By Patrick Smith**

---