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“Not So Friendly Skies”

I am not a jet setter, but I fly frequently. Sometimes, I fly abroad, but usually, I just hop around the U.S. In the course of this hopping, I have observed what I think are conditions that do not reflect positively on the entire airline industry when it comes to its relationship with Black America. In other words, what United called “The Friendly Skies,” don’t appear too friendly from a Black perspective.

Here are the reasons why:

- Ignoring the make-up of company management, when is the last time that you observed a Black pilot or co-pilot? Data from the 2011 Current Population Survey (CPS) by the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that Blacks comprise less than 1.0% of aircraft pilots and engineers. As you know, Blacks comprise over 13% of the U.S. population.
- The lack of Black aircraft pilots and engineers becomes more astonishing given the fact that Blacks comprise 11.1% of transportation attendants according to the CPS.
- The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is everywhere, but seldom do you see a Black TSA official—especially when you move beyond airports in major cities that have sizeable Black populations. (I have a half-year-long request in to TSA inquiring about the percentage of Black employees. No response yet.)
- When Black adult males fly and there are just two or three on a flight, why does it turn out that they end up sitting next to each other so often? Have the airlines determined that their remaining passengers don’t want to be seated near Black males? Recognize that on planes with about 35 or coach seats, the probability of two out of three Black males sitting next to each other is less than 6.0%. The probability drops to less than 3.0% when there are only two Black males on a flight. Both probabilities decline for larger planes. Therefore, it is quite odd that I regularly end up sitting next to other Black males.

One could contend that I am just squawking. However, there is good reason to be concerned about discrimination in the airlines industries. Here are the facts:

- The average (median) weekly wage for the airline industry for 2010 from the CPS was \$889. The national average wage was \$747.
- The airlines industry continues to consolidate: United Airlines recently tied up with Continental Airlines and Northwest and Delta combined recently. The more

consolidated an industry, the greater control firms in that industry have over profit or price. It stands to reason that workers in that industry should be the beneficiaries of their firms' greater market power in the form of higher wages.

- If Blacks are excluded from the industry, then we lose the opportunity to reduce our income gap with Whites by garnering some of those relatively higher wages.

The way the world works today, and with the price of gasoline seemingly ever rising, it is quite often cheaper to fly than to drive. That is Blacks, and everyone else, will find themselves flying more and more in the future. It's just the easiest way to go. Therefore, if Blacks increase their customer share with the airlines, then it seems reasonable that the airlines would hire more Blacks to be on the team that provides the service.

The airlines' response is likely to be that there aren't many qualified Black pilots and engineers. (They forget about the Tuskegee Airmen.) Blacks' response should be that it is difficult to aspire to become something that you do not see. That is, if the airlines were to hire and train more Black pilots and engineers, then more young Blacks would be motivated to aspire to become aircraft pilots and engineers.

The future promises to be about science and technology—including space. However, the starting point for access to space is flying. Therefore, if Black Americans don't begin to produce more pilots, then we are going to be excluded from the friendly skies.

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