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Legislating peace and quiet on planes

Congress could pass bill banning cellphone talk on flights

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Do you have the right to a little peace and quiet on the road? (March 10)

There's no worse form of torture for travelers like Jeanne Marchadie than having to endure the sound of people yakking on a cellphone in close quarters.

"I shudder to think about what's going to happen on planes if cellphones are allowed," says Marchadie, a programmer from Jacksonville, Fla. "What a nightmare — except, of course, to those people who live on their cellphones and force those within hearing distance to listen to their mindless drivel."

She may not have to worry.

A congressional bill banning cellphone chatter on planes is a step closer to passage after recently clearing a House committee. If it becomes law, it would prohibit wireless calls on commercial flights, with exceptions for on-duty crew members and federal law enforcement agents acting in an official capacity.

"Airplane cabins are by nature noisy, crowded, and confined," said Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee chairman, in a statement. "In our day-to-day lives, when we find someone's cellphone call to be too loud, too close, or too personal, we can just walk away. But at 30,000 feet, there's nowhere else for an airline passenger to go."

Silence has been valued since humans started traveling, of course. But the debate about cellphone chatter on planes has touched a nerve, and if the law passes, it could even do something unprecedented: establish that air travelers have a right to a little peace and quiet on their journey.

The tracks for this privilege were laid by Amtrak 14 years ago, when it introduced its first "Quiet Car" at the request of its frequent passengers. Conversations in these cars must be held in subdued tones and should be limited, according to the national rail carrier. If you want to engage in an "extended" conversation, you have to take it to another car. No phone calls are permitted on Quiet Cars, and all electronic devices, including smartphones, must be muted.

To absolutely no one's surprise, the conversation-free cars took off like a runaway train. By April 2001, Quiet Cars had spread to 16 more trains. Today, all of Amtrak's Northeast Regional and Acela Express trains have Quiet Cars, as do many other corridor services around the country. Amtrak does not charge for seating there.

“It’s gratifying to see other carriers adopt this concept,” says Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari.

Hotels have likewise embraced the idea that quiet is a right for some guests. The most high-profile example is Crowne Plaza, which experimented with its Quiet Zones only a few years after Amtrak’s Quiet Cars took to the rails. On its designated quiet floors, the hotel chain promises no room attendant, housekeeping or engineering activities from Sunday to Thursday between 9 p.m. and 10 a.m., unless you request it. Rooms in a Quiet Zone don’t cost extra, and you can find them in every one of Crowne Plaza’s hundreds of hotels.

The airline discussion is a little more complicated. After all, the interior of a commercial aircraft is a noisy place, with sustained sound levels of anywhere between 60 and 70 decibels, or about twice as loud as the average library. In other words, you might have some difficulty hearing the person next to you and probably can’t eavesdrop on a conversation happening even one seat away.

But the issue of quiet on planes captured the public’s attention at the end of last year when the Federal Communications Commission announced that it would consider new rules allowing cellphones to be used above 10,000 feet. Even though wireless devices are already cleared for voice communications on commercial aircraft in other countries, political forces quickly aligned against the FCC’s possible rule-loosening. Shuster’s bill was introduced in December. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx also issued a statement that his agency would “begin a process that will look at the possibility of banning these in-flight calls.”

Stopping cellphones appears to enjoy strong public support. A Quinnipiac University poll found that 59 percent of American voters favor a ban on cellphones on planes. Scores of readers have contacted me in recent weeks to voice their support for chat-free cabins. April Masini, an advice columnist and etiquette expert, says that in a world where escape from noise is often impossible, an airplane is one of the last places where we can count on that silence, such as it is.

“Every now and then,” she adds, “Congress gets it right.”

Is the government finally saying that after airlines took away our legroom, our meals, our service and our ability to make common-sense changes to a ticket, there’s one thing they can’t remove? Is it saying that when you fly, you have the right to a little peace and quiet?

We’re about to find out.

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