

Wolfe: Airplane cell phone bans



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Gavel to Gavel: Lifting the ban up in the air

“We have closed the forward door; please turn off all electronic devices.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” we mumble to ourselves, as we check our beloved email one last time before takeoff – or hide our still-on device, standing in brave defiance of The Man.

So, why make me turn off my favorite travel companion in the first place? The Federal Aviation Administration worries that the electromagnetic waves it emits could interfere with the aircraft’s avionics.

The turn-off-your-device rule has been in place since 1993, subject to the relatively recent change that, above 10,000 feet our freedom to stare at a screen is restored. The rationale? If there’s a problem at that altitude, it can be fixed before a crash. Hmmm.

Fine, but is there any evidence to support this ban? Nope. Though any electrical device can generate interference, all aircraft wiring is insulated to prevent interference, and aviation frequencies are isolated. Despite 20 years of testing, no expert has been able to cause a failure.

In a recent survey, 40 percent of passengers admitted they do not turn off their devices. The odds of all 78 passengers on an average-sized domestic flight powering down every single device are said to be infinitesimal. Interestingly – and unfairly – flight crew members are free to use their iPads without restriction in the cockpit.

The FAA announced last year that it is considering lifting the ban but didn’t say when to expect a decision. If not soon, Congress has threatened to act (Snail v. Tortoise).

Before you get too excited, the ban on talking on your device is likely to continue. First, cell towers are not designed to handle a phone moving at 500 miles per hour. Second, no one wants to sit next to some jerk talking on the phone while traveling cross-country.

Until the FAA finally sets us free, consider Alec Baldwin as a cautionary tale. He refused to quit playing Angry Birds when the forward door shut and, in return, had a nice court visit. Baldwin got off relatively easy. Similar behavior earned a one-year jail sentence for a traveler on a British Airways flight and 70 lashes for a Saudi Arabian passenger.

The Foo Fighters were on point when they penned Wheels:

“When the wheels come down/And you feel like it’s all over/You can use your cellphone/Thank Goodness when the wheels come down.”

Or something like that.