

Amtrak policy on folding bikes

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I've been thrown off the train twice for having a folding bike.

The second time was the best, because I had a copy of the Amtrak policy regarding folding bikes¹ in hand. For those of you who found this page via search engine, here it is for you (as of this writing):

Folding bicycles may be brought aboard certain passenger cars as carry-on baggage. Only true folding bicycles (bicycles specifically designed to fold up into a compact assembly) are acceptable. Generally, these bikes have frame latches allowing the frame to be collapsed, and small wheels. Regular bikes of any size, with or without wheels, are not considered folding bikes, and may not be stored as folding bikes aboard trains.

You must fold up your folding bicycle before boarding the train. You may store the bike only in luggage storage areas at the end of the car (or, in Superliners, on the lower level). You may not store bikes in overhead racks.

Discussion with Amtrak's people indicate that it's even more clear-cut than the above, and by 'certain passenger cars,' they mean all of them.

So the conductor tells me I can't have folding bikes on his train, I show him a copy of the policy, and he is nonplussed and kicks me off the train anyway. The great majority of Amtrak conductors I've met here in the mid-Atlantic reacted similarly to the folding bike on their trains, though only two went so far as to throw me off.

Security has consistently taken issue with people taking photographs inside Washington Union Station, even for the official Amtrak amateur photo contest. Same story: official policy says photography is OK, but the security on the ground has developed its own ideas. Fox News interviewed an Amtrak executive², on location at Union Station, and just as the executive was explaining that official Amtrak policy is to allow cameras in the building, a security guard stopped them and told them they'd have to turn off the cameras and halt the interview.

I've blogged about all this before in an entirely different context, in entry #231. In that case, we had a computer programmed to carry out the law as written by policy-makers, but the programmers threw in all sorts of other rules for their own convenience,

¹http://www.amtrak.com/servlet/ContentServer?cid=1080080554487&pagename=Amtrak%2Fam2Copy%2FSimple_Copy_Page&c=am2Copy

²http://dcist.com/2008/06/fox_5_reporter.php

and ignored those laws that they found hard to code. It's the same story of policy as written and policy as enforced being entirely disjoint, and even directly contradictory.

Once an organization has more people than can comfortably fit around a table, such inconsistencies are inevitable. The question (the only one I'm discussing here) is how one goes about dealing with the glitches.

[I want to focus on the policy issues, and don't want this to be a rant about how I got bad customer service. But because I tried to get a response from Amtrak about the widespread failure of implementers to know the rules they're implementing, it's appropriate for me to tell you Amtrak's handling of the matter. Feel free to skip this as a digression.]

I wrote to Amtrak the day I was last thrown off for having a folding bike, and received a reply three (3) months later. The reply I got (can't give you a link—they go out of their way to leave nothing in writing) explained that official Amtrak policy is to not discuss the formation or implementation of official Amtrak policy with customers. The best I could get from the person I spoke to, in fact, was the following entirely true statement regarding what will happen if I ride with a within-the-rules folding bike: "I can't guarantee you that you won't be thrown off the train."]

Can't RTFM if there isn't one Let me throw in one more digression before getting back to the main storyline, about the word *bureaucrat*. It's typically pejorative. It refers to people who have no sense of humanity or fairness, but instead simply aim to follow some fixed set of rules. We usually call somebody a bureaucrat when they're refusing to bend regarding rules that we think are stupid or should be bent. Though in the cases above, the problem is that the agent failed to be bureaucrat enough: they set aside the rules they should have been enforcing and imposed their personal beliefs about bicyclists or amateur photographers. When a bureaucrat is truly a bureaucrat, it means the bureaucrat is not differentially enforcing the rules depending on the color of your skin or your accent.

So the derogatory tone is sometimes misplaced, and we often want people to be bureaucrats and enforce the darn rules instead of making things up. The question of this essay is what happens when the agent doesn't know the rule at hand. In a perfect world, it's easy: they check the manual or ask somebody who does know. On the Amtrak platform, this never happens, because the train needs to leave now, you're not at a desk with a convenient drawer for the manual, radioing the station manager's desk and asking about this stuff is avoided, and conductors seem to cultivate an air of infallible authority which reading the manual would undermine.

Remember in entry #043, where a brown-skinned U.S. citizen was detained by a passport checker who just didn't like the look of her passport? In a similar manner, before flying, you have to show the airline a valid ticket and a visa or other evidence that you won't get turned away at the other border, because if you do get turned away, the airline has to carry you back for free. U.S. immigration law is thus primarily enforced by people at the check-in counters of airlines the world over.

So, you're a ticket agent in, I dunno, Mauritius, and a person comes to your counter with a piece of paper that says they have a valid asylum claim from the USA. The paper is not very clear to you, because you learned all your English from Fleetwood Mac songs. You've never heard of US Code Title 8 §1158 (Asylum), and even if you had, you certainly wouldn't be able to read it, interpret its subtleties, and apply it to the piece of paper before you.

This is the epitome of the bureaucratic breakdown, and the poor agent at the ticket counter and his/her managers have really no choice at all but to make something up. Without referring to volume upon volume of carefully developed U.S. asylum law, they look over this piece of paper, eyeball the person holding it, and make a decision. Because the airline suffers a cost if they incorrectly say OK, but likely pays no costs if they turn the person away, there will be pressure to resolve uncertainty with a no.

The purpose of this essay, which I'll continue next time, is to consider the stupid little question of what happens when agents are unsure of the rules that they are expected to implement. And as simple as that question is, there are even simpler sub-questions, like whether agents have the ability to look up the rules when uncertain. Next time I'll throw out some thoughts about the questions of incentives, risk, &c. But with regards to that simple first step of looking up the rules if need be, we see that Amtrak's policy mechanism is, for whatever reason, already something of a failure, and immigration law is a big fat flaming failure, because it includes provisions that deputize untrained agents in distant countries to do the work of fully trained US immigration agents.

In both cases, we are left with the worst of all worlds: a massive bureaucratic apparatus with a rule for everything, and agents who arbitrarily enforce whatever seems OK to them, simply because looking up the correct rule is too difficult.