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Air travel threats united passengers after 9/11, but COVID-19 has spurred division on planes

A new crisis is upending travel 20 years after the 2001 terrorist attacks and the painful memories they evoke for American and United airlines crew members who lost colleagues.





A Transportation Security Administration agent watches travelers place their belongings in containers at a security checkpoint at DFW International Airport on Sept. 2. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)



By [Kyle Arnold](#)

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American Airlines flight attendant Julia Simpson was eager to get back on a plane after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks upended air travel 20 years ago and shifted how the world thought about flying on an airplane.

The first plane to strike the World Trade Center buildings was full of flight attendants from Boston, where Simpson was the local union head. Not only was she grieving, but she and thousands of other employees were wondering if this would be the end of American Airlines after two of the Fort Worth-based carrier's planes were used as weapons in the terror attacks.

“There was really a team mentality where we all came together because we needed to get this airline up and running again,” she said. “When flights were happening again, American was really good about coordinating and letting flight attendants fly where they wanted to fly, with who they wanted to fly with.”

Commercial air travel resumed just two days later with security checkpoints at airports that would become standard after that day.

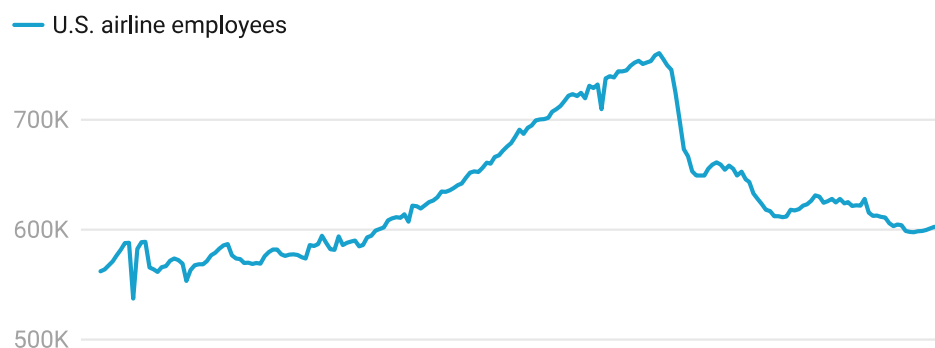
Passengers banded together, too, she said. They watched out for signs of suspicious behavior, they were more willing to help out flight attendants and



“They watched that safety demonstration like a hawk — like they had never seen it,” Simpson said. “20 years later, there is none of that now.”

The U.S. airline industry lost more than 100,000 jobs in the year after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

The 2001 terrorist attacks were followed by a string of airline bankruptcies including United, Delta, Northwest and U.S. Airways (twice). Fort Worth-based American Airlines avoided bankruptcy through steep union concessions.



Two decades after airplanes united travelers against a common enemy — terrorism —the COVID-19 pandemic has pitted passengers against passengers on planes and once again left flight attendants and pilots as the first responders to threats 35,000 feet in the air.

There have been reports of passengers attacking one another over wearing federally mandated masks. Others have attacked flight attendants, such as a California woman charged last week in federal court for punching a flight attendant and knocking out two teeth during an altercation in May. The woman could face more than 30 years in jail.

While airline executives suggested 18 months ago that the COVID-19 crisis would have the same financial impact on the airline industry as the 2001 terrorist



The 2001 terrorist attacks instigated the biggest changes in air travel since commercial airlines started flying after World War II. Passengers were now asked to show up two hours or more early and wait in security lines while federal agents searched bags and scanned for weapons on bodies.

Erin Bowen, an aviation psychologist and professor at the University of Texas-Arlington, said the massive changes to public life after 9/11 were met with a united message from political leaders, the business world and the general population. People grumbled, but few lashed out at the new measures.

“There wasn’t a single person out there saying we don’t need security,” Bowen said. “And you had a remarkable political alignment.”



A memorial for victims of the attacks on Sept. 11 is displayed at Dallas Love Field. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)



said. As the airline industry took on the virus, the traveling public didn't embrace the same solutions for beating COVID-19 as they did for stopping terrorism.

"Pretty much everyone agrees that blowing up airplanes was bad and causing airplanes to cause destruction was not acceptable," Bowen said. "You don't have the same agreement on how to get out of this crisis."

So far this year, the FAA has received more than 4,000 complaints about unruly passengers on planes. Almost 3,000 of those complaints have involved individuals upset over wearing masks. The agency has initiated 143 enforcement cases and fined passengers more than \$1 million.

Julie Hedrick, head of the Association of Professional Flight Attendants at American Airlines, said there was a sharp uptick in unruly passengers after the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol building.

"After 9/11, everyone was looking out for each other," Hedrick said. "Today when something happens on an airplane, a lot of times other passengers join in with the person that is misbehaving."

And it may be too late to unwind some of that division among passengers.

"I don't think this will go away when the mask mandate is gone," she said. The mask mandate is now set to expire Jan. 18, 2022.

For the most part, unruly passengers and mask scofflaws have been isolated to the airplane, and often after the door shuts and the plane departs.

"The mask compliance at DFW has been pretty spot on and people seem to understand the safety and compliance measures," said Kriste Jordan Smith, Transportation Security Administration director at DFW International Airport. "We have had to acknowledge that there have been some issues with people that weren't familiar with our system and haven't been through our airport in a long time, though."



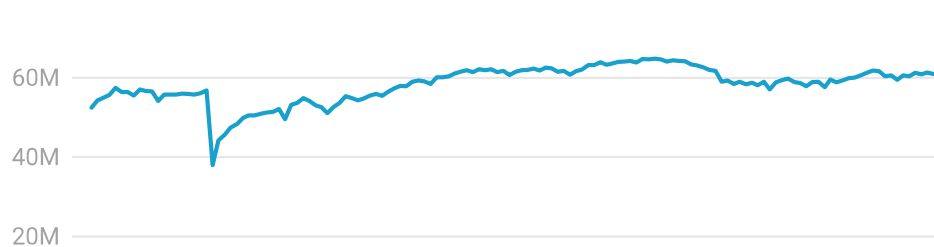
as smooth either. After the program was implemented, it would often take an hour or more to make it through security lines. Lines could be even longer on peak travel days. Now it's rare to find lines longer than 20 or 30 minutes, even at the busiest airports in the country like DFW.

Still, Jordan Smith said passengers responded well to post-9/11 security protocols.

It took three years for air traffic to recover after the 2001 terrorist attacks but the impact of COVID-19 was much steeper

In 2001 and 2002, American Airlines (AMR Group) lost \$5.3 billion as passenger traffic decreased sharply following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. In 2020, the company lost \$8.9 billion even with \$4.2 billion in government payroll support grants.

— U.S. airline passenger enplanements



The threat of a uniformed law enforcement agent may be the difference between unruly passengers in the air and calm passengers at security checkpoints, said Steve Karoly, a former TSA assistant administrator who now works with security firm K2.

“If you cause a problem in line, you might not ever make it to your plane,” Karoly said. “It’s a whole different problem when someone won’t comply after the plane has taken off.”

For many inside the airline industry, there are other parallels between the early days of the COVID-19 crisis and the terror attacks 20 years ago.



and the widespread fallout caused the airline industry to lose more than 100,000 jobs in the next year.

American Airlines, which was struggling financially, avoided bankruptcy by forcing employee unions to take steep wage and benefit concessions. Other airlines, including United, Northwest and U.S. Airways, filed for bankruptcy.

Simpson, who continued to fly after the terror attacks, said the economic turmoil exacted on airlines in both 2001 and during the COVID-19 crisis spurred a similar response from crew members.

“We didn’t know if we would have jobs in a few months,” Simpson said. “But we wanted to do all we could to help.”

Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, said flight attendants gained a new level of respect in 2001.



Travelers load their belongings into containers at a security checkpoint at Dallas Love Field. That's one of the changes resulting from the 2001 terrorist attacks. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)



After all, flight attendants Sandra Bradshaw and CeeCee Lyles joined passengers on United Airlines flight 93 to rush the hijacked cockpit and force the plane to crash in Pennsylvania, preventing a collision course with either the U.S. Capitol or the White House.

“It was a national tragedy and we were at the center of it,” Nelson said. “It was our workplace.”

Nelson, who has worked at United for 25 years, said she had friends among the nine crew members killed when United Airlines flight 175 crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center.

In the months after the attacks, Nelson said boarding passengers frequently told her they were ready to help if anything went wrong.

While 2001 made terror attacks a No. 1 priority for flight attendants every day going forward, the COVID-19 crisis has created a new daily anxiety for crew members showing up to work. Today, the problems are isolated to a small number of passengers who are ready to cause a confrontation when they step foot on the airplane.

“It’s harder to put the uniform on,” she said. “It’s harder when you have to go to work and you are mentally preparing for it.”



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