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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Airlines' excuses just won't fly

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In Mike Nichols' classic film "The Graduate," Mr. McGuire comes up to Benjamin Braddock, played by Dustin Hoffman, and says, "I just want to say one word to you. Just one word." The one word he says is "plastics." The word has been a kind of koan for more than 40 years. It is now time to replace it.

Everything is swollen beyond our unrealistic expectations these days: the price of gas, the number of real estate foreclosures, unemployment statistics. The cost of the Iraq war grows and grows, whether measured in dollars, in impact on America's international reputation, in human lives, or in the 100 years John McCain is willing to have American troops and mercenaries stay there. So let's replace the one word "plastics" by three: "Whisky Romeo Zulu."

If you want to know what is at stake when Federal Aviation Administration inspectors are coerced to pass structurally weakened Southwest Airlines planes, or when American Airlines grounds half its scheduled flights because it did not get mandated repairs right the first time, don't listen to American Airlines representatives who say safety was never compromised and that they are victims of "stepped up scrutiny" on the part of the FAA. Go rent the Argentine film "Whiskey Romeo Zulu."

Those words are the NATO phonetic alphabet identifier of the Boeing 737-200 operated by Líneas Aéreas Privadas Argentinas (LAPA) as Flight 3142. It crashed on Aug. 31, 1999, on take-off from Buenos Aires, killing 65 and severely injuring 17. "Whiskey Romeo Zulu," released in 2005, is a myth in the classic sense of all great myths. It reveals truths by giving us profound insights into how human beings behave and the tragic consequences that follow upon the choices we make, choices often resulting from human weakness, what Aristotle would call our tragic flaws.

The movie reveals the corruption at work within LAPA and the regulatory agencies that should have seen to the safety of Argentine commercial planes. We also see the cost to the principled pilot named Enrique Piñeyro, who was viewed as a troublemaker and chicken little for bringing up safety violations and equipment failures aboard LAPA flights. Pilots and regulators were coerced by LAPA supervisors in tandem with government regulators to overlook these problems to keep planes flying and making money for the airlines. Eventually, he refuses to fly and is replaced.

When Flight 3142 crashes, LAPA blames pilot error. However, a scrupulous district attorney unearths Piñeyro's reports and is able to demonstrate that pilots were habituated to ignore safety alarms. The pilots on Flight 3142 ignored the wrong alarm.

"Whiskey Romeo Zulu" rings true because the screenwriter, director and main actor are all Piñeyro himself. Like all great myths, the film reveals deep truths about ourselves, emotionally and intellectually.

I have flown more than 1 million miles on American Airlines alone. I am living proof that American Airlines has been attentive to safety since 1985. But it let things slide recently with an eye to its quarterly reports.

American did not notify me that my flight last Thursday was grounded. I found out from a friend at my destination. I was relieved that I would not be in the air in an unsafe plane. When I finally got through to a reservations specialist, Cora in Tucson, she worked for one hour and six minutes to find me an alternative flight.

There is nothing wrong then with what American did last week or how its ticketing agents responded. The fault is in the emphasis on profits that led to the crisis, which could have been avoided, and the focus now in American's news releases on how terribly they are being treated by the FAA.

I could say "hogwash," but I'll say instead, "Whiskey Romeo Zulu," a new koan for our age when corporate profits take precedence over the lives of human beings.

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This version contains some small changes to the printed version.