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Airline Safety: Common Sense and Nonsense

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If you boarded an airplane and had some concern about it being hijacked, would you be more concerned about an older woman with a sewing kit, or a young man in casual clothing with no visible carry-on items as a fellow passenger? If you answered the young man, you are being rational rather than an anti-young-man bigot. Older women are not hijackers. Hijackers and terrorists are almost always men, and most often men in their 20s or early 30s.

Eight days ago, I returned from Europe to the United States like many other stranded Americans, and had an involuntary opportunity to be part of the effort to give the illusion of increased airplane passenger safety. We were told that we must put all sharp objects in our checked luggage, and I dutifully checked my Swiss Army knife. I also watched security personnel seize tweezers from an older woman. The fact is these actions made me less rather than more safe, given that I no longer had any potential weapon to use in defense against a hijacker.

Some passengers brought on little American flags, which was a nice gesture. However, the points on the flags were much more dangerous than the lady's tweezers, but it would have been politically incorrect, given the emotion of the moment, to seize the flags (or not permit young men to fly).

Also, some passengers brought on umbrellas. An umbrella can be a murder weapon, as all of us who remember the murder of Georgi Markov in the London subway by the communist Bulgarian agent with the poison-tipped umbrella know. Many personal items can be used as murder weapons: belts can be used to strangle, and so forth.

The only way to prevent objects from being used as murder weapons is to require all passengers to travel in the nude after a body cavity search. The passengers would not be allowed to eat with a knife and fork because they could be turned into weapons.

But you would still have the problem of passengers who have been taught how to kill with their bare hands. Absurd restrictions on what people can carry on to planes do not increase safety but do increase the misery of the flying public.

I arrived home just in time to see "60 Minutes," where they had a story on the deplorable state of airport security. They made a big issue of the fact that many airport security personnel are not highly paid and not well trained – which is obvious to all of us who travel frequently. However, do you really think that having more highly paid and trained people would stop a determined hijacker, particularly one who intends to commit suicide?

Would we have not been better off spending more money trying to infiltrate terrorist organizations and less money going through people's pockets and personal items as they board airplanes?

The truth is we would all be safer with more weapons on airplanes – in the hands of trained airplane crews. (I am not advocating guns, but such devices as non-lethal stun guns and mace, kept appropriately secured.)

While waiting in London to board our airplane – we had several hours – I asked some of my fellow passengers how much airline safety they wanted. Like everything else in life, travel involves tradeoffs. Would you fly if you knew the probability of getting killed on the flight was 1 in 100 (1 percent)? This is close to the probability of getting killed when taking the space shuttle – and Dennis Tito reportedly spent \$20 million for the privilege. Would you fly if the chance of dying were 1 in 1,000? Ten thousand? One million? To attend to a very ill loved one, the 1 percent chance might seem acceptable, while taking a pleasure trip you might want it to be 1 in 100,000. (In recent years there has been about one death per 300 million passenger miles – which means that it is safer to be in a commercial airliner than to be driving.)

When we make airline travel inconvenient because of excessive security concerns, we put ourselves more at risk. At the moment, the government has shut down Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. Many of those who took the air shuttle to New York are now driving, and we know that driving is about 20 times more dangerous than flying (flying is also much safer than taking the train). There is a very slight chance for a terrorist incident at Reagan Airport. However, we know with great certainty that every day that Reagan Airport stays closed there will be more automobile deaths.

Even with the horrific numbers of deaths, including those on the ground, from the terrorism of this last week, we would be far safer getting the planes back in the air. On average about 120 people are killed every day in the U.S. in automobiles. This worst terrorist air incident in history was equal to about 45 average days of automobile deaths in the United States.

We can do a few sensible things to reduce the terrorist threat on planes. At least some members of the airline crew should be trained in the use of and have non-lethal weapons under adequate security. Airport security personnel should be trained to focus on high-risk passengers (i.e. young males, particularly from countries that are known to harbor terrorists), and not fixate on normal objects (cell phones, Swiss army knives, etc.) that people carry with them on planes. How many times have you seen middle aged women required to remove their jewelry as they go through the detectors? It is a silly exercise that takes time and resources from focusing on real risks.

We can make reasonable airline safety compatible with liberty and convenience. (Convenience is part of the quality of life that free people seek and enjoy.) We need to get over the idea that air travel has to be 100 percent safe. This cannot be achieved

unless no one flies at all. However, we can easily make air travel many more times safer as automobile travel (which to most people is an acceptable risk) without making the process miserable and an affront to our dignity. To do otherwise means the terrorists have won.

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