

FRIENDLY SKIES
Deaths per billion passenger miles

Automobiles	7.30
Motorcycles	212.00
Trains	0.43
Buses	0.11
Commercial aviation	0.07

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
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Flying off the Handle over Risks

By Richard W. Rahn

EXCESSIVE AIRPORT SECURITY ENCOURAGES TRAVELERS TO DRIVE

Did the authorities, in “an abundance of caution,” take too long to reinstate operations after the tragic shootings in the Fort Lauderdale airport this past Friday? The airport was shut down immediately after the shootings and remained shut for more than 12 hours, even though the shootings were carried out by a lone gunman who had been captured almost immediately. Passengers who were on planes that had landed but not yet been unloaded were kept on the tarmac for many hours — in some cases, without adequate food, water and lavatories. Some of them were probably suffering health problems and the delay may have done them real damage. Was all of that necessary?

Predictably, some commentators immediately called for more security at airport baggage counters and for more restrictions on guns. More thoughtful people noted that the costs and inconveniences of more “hardening” of airports and surrounding areas would be counterproductive. Each additional step to make flying (and airports) “appear” safer increases costs, time and inconvenience, causing more and more people to drive — and die — rather than fly.

The fact is that it is extremely rare for anyone to die on a scheduled airline commercial flight in the United States. Flying is more than 100 times safer than driving and something like 3,000 times safer than going by motorcycle. People engage in extreme sports, such as alpine skiing — which is dangerous — but relatively safe when it comes to activities such as bungee jumping, let alone wingsuit flying. Even though some would argue for banning all such activities, most would say that free people have the right to risk their lives by doing something that gives them pleasure, as long as they have a rough idea of the risks.

Government officials tend to take the “abundance of caution” approach because most people are ignorant about relative risks, and if something goes wrong and someone dies, the media can point to some official who will be blamed. Those who have chosen to drive rather than fly because of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) actions, and then die in automobile accidents, are invisible to both the media and the government officials who are implicitly responsible. The same “precautionary principle” is found through many government agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which routinely delays or denies approval for many drugs that will save more people than they kill. Those who die by taking the drug are known (all drugs have risks), but most of those who are saved are unknown — and FDA bureaucrats and their political masters know they can only get in trouble by the death of a person with a name who takes an approved drug.

The TSA is not a total disaster. It has developed programs such as TSA Pre-Check and Global Entry, which have somewhat sped up the airport process, but to nowhere near what it could accomplish if required to have everyone through security in less than 10 minutes — which they could easily do by proper staffing at peak times and allocating resources on the basis of real risks. TSA should be focusing on people who have mental problems or fit a terrorist risk profile (and forget political correctness). TSA also needs to get over the fixation with physical objects,

such as Swiss Army knives and knitting needles. Many objects (a belt or bra strap) can be used to kill people in the wrong hands, and guns are safe in the right hands. If a terrorist or mentally ill person is determined to kill, they do not need a gun or bomb — a truck will do.

Most TSA agents do a good job and are pleasant, but still too many continue to be abusive and rude, rather than trying to be helpful to travelers who are already under stress. TSA employees need to have their name or a badge number displayed in a manner clearly readable so that passengers can easily identify agents who have acted poorly or exceptionally well. (This is becoming standard practice with many police and various types of service employees — including airline personnel.) The cameras that now film TSA checkpoints need to be upgraded so that all interactions with passengers — including conversations — are fully recorded. If passengers have a complaint, they or their representatives — and members of the press — should be allowed full access to the videos.

Long, slow lines at airports and unnecessary harassment of passengers cause more people to drive, greatly increasing their chances of dying. It is possible to have high levels of security without abusing anyone and particularly low-risk people, such as small children and the elderly. The new administration could gain favor with the public by making sure that all of those at the TSA (including the union) get the message that if their behavior and procedures do not immediately improve to make them more user-friendly, the agency will be privatized — because it is literally a matter of life and death.

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