

REASON, NOT EMOTION, KEEPS TERRORISTS ON THEIR TOES AND OUT OF OUR AIRLINES

By Anjum Malik

The attempted bombing of Flight 253 means that America is again examining how best to ensure air safety while upholding our society's values. Americans are compassionate about individual life and human dignity. Terrorists know this and are playing on our emotions. They have instilled fear and chaos at our airports and wreaked havoc with our economy. The rush to quick fix our security failures may lead to procedures that simply make us feel safer, rather than creating actual safety.

The first step is to calm down and ensure our response is formulated on facts and logic, not emotion. We need an integrated, layered approach. Intelligence is our first line of defense. It should be gathered and shared effectively. This layered approach also includes behavior profiling, investigating people depending on where they travel and spend time and using assets like technology and canines. Unfortunately, our reaction to Flight 253 has been dominated by emotion rather than reason. Both of the key solutions offered are high-profile and dramatic, but of dubious value compared to less flashy options:

Rapiscan scanning machines are an expensive, unproven technology potentially vulnerable to user error. Yet, the U.S. is now planning to buy 300 more of them at a cost of approximately \$75 million. We should evaluate the machines we have before ordering more. The technology for these machines is still developing but remains unchanged in three years. Before we commit money to Rapiscan, we must insist that they develop systems that detect explosive particles.

If these machines had passed rigorous TSA tests, you can bet Rapiscan would be touting the results. Scanners only penetrate 1/8" under the skin, leaving opportunity for terrorists to conceal dangerous items, such as within a body cavity or under a fold of skin. While new technology may provide a sense of security, it should not be merely a facade.

After a passenger goes through a scanner, other problems arise. There is a long interval between scanning and boarding an aircraft. Terrorists have considerable time to obtain items for violent use. Certain restaurants have steak knives. Mustard gas can be made from common cleaning supplies. Harmful liquids can be smuggled in through the delivery chain in water and or bottles. Flammable alcohols can be purchased at duty free stores.

Adding additional screening to individuals coming from 14 countries may put additional pressure on terrorists. But it is not a magic bullet and must be combined with other measures. It must also be weighed against possible political and diplomatic consequences. If we damage relations with these countries, it could make the U.S. less secure. Targeting someone because of race, ethnicity, or religion is not the American way. Failing to examine someone under reasonable suspicion is dangerous. The U.S. has been guilty of both since 9/11.

Our enemy constantly adapts. We need to adapt too, persistently identifying and closing our vulnerabilities. We are in an “Arms Race” with the terrorists and must be proactive rather than reactive. Fortunately, there are multiple steps we can take that genuinely increase the safety of air travel.

During peak travel, TSA only authenticates 25% of all documents with a black light and only screens 25% of cargo going on airplanes. Baggage handlers are not well monitored and passengers have considerable time to construct explosive devices or harmful liquids. Therefore, higher security at aircraft entry points, for both passengers and checked bags, greatly reduces risks. Additional sniffer dogs and behavior monitoring at boarding gates combats risks between security and boarding.

Additionally, TSA must effectively use its security cameras to screen behavior. And, like any workplace, TSA employees need monitoring to ensure their work meets expected standards.

Air marshals are another good, common sense idea that should be more fully employed.

It is useful to look at the best practices of nations experienced in air travel security. Israel’s security challenges are well known — yet El Al, the national airline, is the world’s most secure. They have their own security in addition to airport security. Each passenger is briefly interviewed and their behavior closely monitored at the boarding gate. But first class passengers dine with steak knives – a display of confidence that speaks volumes.

All of these measures have been talked about since 9/11, but none are fully implemented. The emotion-driven responses cobbled together since then exhibit a “destroying air travel to save it” philosophy. Air travel has now become so unpleasant that, in some ways, we are achieving the terrorists’ goal for them. The system needs to be rethought from the ground up — with consumer input.

Airport security should be convenient but not compromise safety. We need to examine if new security measures are really worthwhile or just smoke and mirrors to reassure passengers something is being done. Proven and effective methods trump costly myopic schemes proposed reflexively following the Christmas Day attempted attack. The real goal is to keep real pressure on terrorists — not create a colorful, noisy security circus.

The terrorists are our enemies — we must not aid them by putting all our eggs in the Rapisan basket, spending foolishly and giving into a climate of panic.

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