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A FAILURE OF IMAGINATION? BY PHILIP BAUM

Alvin Toffler's statement that "September 11th involved a failure of imagination" is much quoted. Indeed, two speakers at the recent AVSEC World conference utilised the phrase during their presentations. Few of us were prepared to consider that men, or women for that matter, would learn to pilot jets in order to fly them on suicidal missions into densely populated areas. It would be too callous an act. No human being could sink to such depths. But they did...

Now that the game rules have changed so that no depraved act can ever again be considered beyond the realms of reality; we are being asked to tax our brains to contemplate the unthinkable. The detonation of a chemical or biological device on an aircraft over a major city perhaps? Or how about hacking into an air traffic control system and creating mayhem in the skies? A suicide bomber strolling into a check-in hall or mixing with meeters and greeters at arrivals? Given their extreme patience, actually infiltrating an airline with fully qualified pilots, engineers or other persons that could cause the aircraft never to reach its intended destination? Their imagination is hardly lacking and it is now incumbent upon us to respond in an equally intelligent manner.

Fortunately, significant research and development into new technologies is afoot that will assist us. Certain governments are proffering financial incentives and grants to manufacturers who can demonstrate that they have devised a technology that is likely to form yet another piece of the patchwork quilt that safeguards aviation. Venture capitalists are, given the current political climate, also keen to invest in promising solutions. Yet, in the knowledge that our industry could be hit again at any time, by people who are hardly likely to wait until the next piece of kit is operational, we need to ensure that we implement, wherever possible, procedures that are likely to minimise the risk until an appropriate technology is available.

Let's take an example of typical arguments against the use of two security measures, profiling and the deployment of sky marshals, and let's see if we cannot be more imaginative in identifying a constructive solution.

What do we do when we identify somebody as posing a potential threat to aviation by their behaviour yet, when searched, we find no weapon? Generally, we allow them to board the flight. It is hard not to, given the absence of a weapon that would prove our initial suspicions were correct. However, we also know that a person can pose a risk to a flight regardless as to whether he has a weapon when boarding. There are any number of items on board which he (or she) could use, including their own physical strength. And, we must accept that it is always a possibility that a weapon could be infiltrated on board by another individual, including ground servicing personnel.

Airline personnel are understandably extremely reluctant to deny a passenger the right to board on the basis of demeanour alone. After all, in these days of litigation and compensation, court cases would be aplenty. Yet by allowing the passenger to board without taking additional security measures, we are actually saying "let's take a chance, after all he's probably not a threat". Probably not, but then the whole essence of aviation security is searching for needles in haystacks. When we do have cause for concern, surely we must act as if our fears are well grounded. The question then is how to allow the passenger to board without endangering the flight?

Before we answer that question, let's consider the sky marshal debate. Traditional objections relate to the economic realities of carrying them on every flight, the sheer numbers that would need to be employed and even the risk of their applying for such employment with malintent, let alone the possibility of accidental discharge of a weapon at 33,000 feet. Albeit a supporter

of sky marshal deployment, I accept that for certain countries, it is an ideal rather than a practical solution. Many states compromise by deploying sky marshals on high-risk flights or on random flights. Yet maybe there is a more intelligent solution? Why do we not deploy sky marshals on flights that are high risk because of the passengers they are carrying rather than the route the aircraft is flying? And this is where the two issues outlined converge...

When we identify a potentially threatening passenger, why do we not deploy sky marshals to that flight? Sky marshals who are advised as to the seat location of the passenger in question and who will, whilst also surveying the rest of the passengers on board, be well placed to take any action should it be necessary. To a certain extent, that's what the airlines that do use both 100% profiling and 100% sky marshal deployment do on a daily basis. The passenger gets to fly, without any knowledge of being kept under surveillance and the risk is further diminished.

I can hear the counter arguments already! That means there will be sky marshals sitting around airports, not knowing whether they will go home at the end of an 8-hour shift or are likely to find themselves the other side of the globe. Yes! That means that we will be spending a fortune on the transportation of one passenger who is probably frightened of flying. Yes! That means that we might have to bump off fare-paying passengers in order to carry the sky marshals. Yes! In fact there would be loads of other problems to overcome, but overcome them we must. Here is but one example of a solution that is not dependent upon our awaiting the arrival of new technology that counters a very real threat.

One of the other issues that is solved by such a methodology is that of determining which flights are actually high-risk. The new breed of international terrorist has demonstrated time and time again in

recent years that the attack will take place where we least expect it - embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, nightclubs in Indonesia, domestic flights in the United States and synagogues in Turkey.

There can be no better example than today's breaking news. As I write, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair meet in London, a city under the highest level of security surveillance because we have determined the risk of terrorism to be significant. Yet, Al Qaeda, have again demonstrated their "imagination", intelligence and capability by carrying out a suicidal mission against the British consulate in Istanbul, far away from where we have focused our security efforts. So, from an aviation perspective, whilst we must rightly pay attention to the more sensitive air routes, any flight must be considered a potential target.

And for an example of where targeted sky marshaling might have worked to our benefit, look no further than Richard Reid, identified through profiling as being a potential threat to the flight, yet allowed to

board. However courageous the American Airlines crew were that day, we were also extremely lucky. Or, how about Paul Mukonyi, the deranged individual who tried to take control of a British Airways jet en route to Nairobi having already drawn attention to himself at the boarding gate? Again, whilst the crew performed miracles, the fact that the jet had to be rescued from a 10,000 feet plunge should raise serious questions about our "passenger acceptance" procedures.

The big question will be, as always, "who pays"? My view is the government, given that I agree with airline and airport representative organisations that they are neither the cause of terrorism nor the ultimate target. Yet, there would need to be certain safeguards to ensure that airlines were not summoning sky marshals for every flight "just to be sure"...

This is but one example and, in an editorial such as this, I have had to make certain broad generalisations and sweeping statements. It is not as easy as it sounds and I'd

be the first to acknowledge that. However whether it is in relation to our complacency in respect of passenger screening, lack of attention to cargo screening, laissez-faire attitude to airport staff screening, abdication of responsibility for control over public areas of airport terminals or wavering and procrastination over crew security training, we have to act.

I'm not proposing any knee-jerk reaction, for these are issues long discussed. Given the current threat, the likelihood of another attack is high. The problem is few of us really believe it could happen "tomorrow"; if we did, these would not be issues and the economic arguments against most measures would disappear. We know the effect that 11 September 2001 had on our industry; a similar incident would have even more dire consequences.

We will be judged more harshly, for we cannot claim in our defence that, "we'd never imagined". Far worse than failing in our imagination, we would have failed to act when we knew we should and could. ■

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