

# AVIATIONsecurity

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# Abdicating Responsibility: at what cost?



by Philip Baum

**Who should foot the bill for the wide range of security measures necessary to safeguard aviation?**

The airlines and airports argue that, as terrorist attacks against aviation are actually intended to target the State and that the airliner is only a tool to achieve that goal, it is the State that should finance the countermeasures. Protecting the flying public, and those on the ground who may also become victims as a result of a criminal act in the air, is a national responsibility. In the same way that taxpayers support the nation's education system regardless as to whether they have children or not, so too should the taxpayer contribute to safe skies whether they fly or not. Or so they maintain!

Indeed, the European Air Transport Industry Policy Paper on Aviation Security published on 16 January this year emphasised this view in no uncertain terms. "The air transport industry considers that countering the threat of terrorism is a national security duty. In this regard, EU Member States must implement a comprehensive policy for financing security measures that in practice serve to protect Europe's citizens from threats of terrorism. More stringent aviation security measures introduced nationally by EU Member States as a response to terrorist threats must be financed by national governments' general budget."

Governments, on the other hand, are keen to ensure that the airlines and airports share the responsibility for maintaining aviation security and contend that any costs that the industry incurs as a result of a need for additional security measures should be passed on to those who elect to fly. However popular air travel has become, it is still a luxury and there are millions of people in the most developed nations that have never partaken of its service because they cannot afford to do so; public funds would be better spent on health care, education, housing and

job creation. Or so they maintain!

Of course both are right as ultimately one cannot separate the two. The economic impact of a terrorist atrocity has a direct effect on the national economy and, whether one flies or not, each citizen may be affected by the failure of our security infrastructure. Meanwhile, when an industry, such as aviation, works on extremely narrow profit margins, how can it be expected to pay out for a seemingly never-ending stream of additional security requirements?

However, perhaps before we ask who pays, we should ask the question what we are trying to protect ourselves from? Aviation security measures are supposed to counter any unlawful attack against aviation. That means to prevent terrorist attacks and the actions of criminals and mentally disturbed individuals who may wish to target the industry.

If this is so, then the statement in the aforementioned industry policy paper is simply further evidence of the fact that the industry has become so blinded by the high publicity of September 11th that it has allowed itself to focus exclusively on the terrorist threat.

In respect of the terrorist threat, I would share the industry's view that the responsibility for countermeasures lies firmly on the State's shoulders. This is especially true if one is talking about the likes of al Qaeda-style terrorism. After all it is the national and international intelligence services that are our best defence. This has been proven by the number of potential incidents that have been prevented by their sterling efforts around the globe. The recently publicised prevention of another suicidal mission in California, post-911, is an example of this.

Airport security, for me, is not about counter-terrorism. I simply do not believe that the systems put in place at airports or by airlines that rely on screeners, technology or a combination of the two are any match for a sophisticated terrorist network. If we were

supposed to be able to identify terrorists at the 11th hour, we would, at the very least, use an intelligent approach to our screening methodology. Currently, whilst arguably an effective deterrent, we have opted for a solution devoid of intelligence, at least as far as the passenger screening process is concerned. Exemplifying this is the fact that most countries, even those with a reasonable track record vis-à-vis aviation security, have succumbed to the belief that by lowering the threshold at which a metal detector will alarm (evidenced by the fact that now passengers are taking their belts off, their shoes off and removing coins from pockets) and getting people to remove laptops from baggage, they are somehow enhancing security.

Airport security is about preventing unlawful attacks against aviation, whatever the cause. I'm not totally resigning myself from our role in counter-terrorism, but I do maintain that there are a wide range of other threats we can identify that, if left unidentified, can endanger a flight and those on board.

And here the industry must play its part and pay the price. Criminal attacks and the actions of disruptive passengers are not targeting the state and the industry should not expect the State to finance its own protection against such individuals.

Airlines have a lot to learn. Whilst we can be sympathetic to the economic impact of security measures on them, their airport-based personnel all too often take chances with people's lives. Staff working for contract screening companies frequently bemoan the fact that they are forced into compromising their security efforts by airline personnel worried about on time performance; the end result is cabin searches of questionable value, late passengers being whisked through the system when, in reality, extra attention needs to be paid to them, and the creation of an environment where customer service comes first at the expense of security. First class and business class passengers are, all

## “We will all pay should the system fail and we should all pay to ensure that it doesn’t”

too often, fast-tracked through the screening process. Airline managers who try to deny this live in a false sense of reality.

The State should still play its role by mandating the measures the industry should implement as part of their duty of care to passengers and crew. The standards set should be high and cover operational procedures and human resource issues, including staff vetting, training and testing, and all should be regularly checked by the State to ensure compliance. States must ensure that the industry does not compromise security for the sake of customer service. It's already happening in many areas but all too often in order to fulfil bureaucratic requirements rather than to improve security. Take the vetting of cargo agents as an example.

Aviation security is costly to airports and airlines, but they do have the opportunity to recoup some of the expense from the passengers. This may result in additional security fees being levied either on passengers or on airlines (to be passed on to

passengers) by the airports as a way of ensuring a level playing field for all departing passengers. It may require a change of mindset, especially as more and more low cost carriers take to the skies and with even the legacy airlines dramatically reviewing their pricing structures.

The airports are ideally positioned to charge passengers and can certainly create a level playing field for airlines departing any one location. For example, whilst one carrier may permit its passengers to carry excess hand baggage on board and others are stricter, the airport can ensure that only certain quantities (or sizes) of baggage be taken through the passenger screening checkpoints. This enhances security by speeding up the flow of passengers and reducing the size of the haystack that the screeners have to inspect. And, if a passenger wants to take more through and the airline permits him to, the passenger should pay the excess.

There is little in the news that is encouraging. Society is becoming ever more violent,

the tensions between religious groupings ever more extreme and diplomatic solutions to potentially global conflicts ever more distant. We witness this on our streets in the form of happy slapping attacks perpetrated against lone individuals in London, mob violence resulting in the destruction of embassies in Beirut, and the democratic election of rogue organisations to power in Palestine.

In this scary world we live in, we are obligated to safeguard the travelling public. We can whinge about the cost, but quality has a price. We will all pay should the system fail and we should all pay to ensure that it doesn't. Governments must underwrite the counter-terrorist operations, as they do, and the industry must see to it that it does not allow itself to abdicate itself of its responsibility to ensure that it protects its users from the entire range of criminal acts to which it can be subjected...and if you turn over the page and view the Air Watch section of this journal covering the last two months incidents alone, you will see there are many.

# CARGO PROTECTION BEGINS WITH DETECTION

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