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Random Search *by Philip Baum*

I have been a frequent traveller to the United States over the years and have never failed to be shocked by the screening afforded passengers. Enough has been written, both in this journal and in the general media, on the subject... or so I thought.

I write this editorial en route from San Francisco to London having spent a week in the United States, during which I managed to experience the security screening processes at Washington Dulles, Albuquerque, Denver and, today, San Francisco. I don't normally name airports since ASI has a policy of no exposés, but today is different because the exposés are of a positive kind. For once I can gaze out of the window (now over-flying the snowy Mid West) feeling reassured that the authorities have taken reasonable steps to ensure my security and those of the people around me.

In each location it was like a breath of fresh air. One could see security, real security. Sure I have my criticisms, but they are, I like to think, constructive. Yet I'd like to start by applauding the efforts made at checkpoints across the United States. Every X-ray operator seemed focused, on-the-job training was in progress and the quality of the searches carried out were some of the best I have seen anywhere in the world.

Too bad it took such a tragedy to turn the situation around. That said, we still have to ask ourselves whether or not the September 11th hijackers could penetrate the invigorated system now in place in American airports.

I am reasonably confident that general detection rates will go up (although the figures must be viewed in the context of a travelling public being more security aware themselves, resulting in fewer "threat" items being there to discover, and the fact that certain items considered dangerous

today were perfectly acceptable pre-911), yet the box cutter carrier is likely to remain unidentified given the limitations of X-ray technology. That said, the deterrent value of the 2002 checkpoints is much higher. The sight of passengers being randomly screened, having their belt buckles inspected, shoes removed and tested with explosive trace detectors is of tremendous value, but it did get me thinking about the concept of random search.

My thoughts are in no way a criticism of the United States' new approach as many other countries do see value in the process.

We first need to define "random". Without a dictionary to hand (and I'm not sure that United Airlines carry them), let's see what words the Microsoft Thesaurus generates and see if, assisted by that, we can achieve this initial goal. "Indiscriminate. Haphazard. Aimless. Confused. Indistinguishable. Unplanned. Purposeless...and, errrr, Promiscuous"! Not very encouraging. I would not like to describe any security process using such words, save, perhaps, the first.

The problem is that maybe random searching is just that. Maybe it is aimless, confused and purposeless. What are we really trying to achieve? I have always viewed it as being primarily of deterrent value, yet if that value is supposed to enhance security that it must be a process that sends out the message that each passenger has a reasonable chance of being selected for such screening.

Regrettably, what I have witnessed in both the United States and elsewhere in the world where secondary screening at the departure gate is part of the process, the numbers being so screened are very low and, more importantly, if one gauges passenger flow through a checkpoint for a few seconds, it is relatively easy to ensure that one is not selected. Indeed, apart

from on one occasion when my colleague and I wanted to be selected to experience the search (he was successful in his endeavours), I now regularly engage in flow analysis just in order to avoid the hassle of having my bags and body searched. I have yet to be selected.

Most such screening seems to be conducted by a male and a female screener so that, given the impressive comprehensive nature of such searches, one can reasonably judge the right time to join the queue and avoid selection.

Of even greater concern was the reluctance to conduct such screening for passengers arriving at the gate late, when the aircraft was truly ready for departure. Given the high number of incidences where that has been the ploy of hijackers to bypass security systems and justify their nerves and perspiration, perhaps we should re-think the random selection process.

If one wishes to maintain the "random" nature of secondary screening, rather than employ a "selective" process, a number of simple measures could make the process more valuable. Firstly, if it were done on the basis of seat number, one could ensure that the process be truly random. No matter what time one arrives at the gate, what class one is travelling or how close to another randomly selected passenger one is in the line, the process is itself secure.

An alternative approach would be to conduct the random selection out of sight of passengers and ensuring that late passengers were automatically selected, albeit that the latter ruling would move the process from random screening into the realms of selective screening.

That, however, is perhaps the best move... by starting to be more selective in our screening process. Although extremely controversial, I would embrace any process

by which those passengers who give us cause for concern, based on their behaviour and demeanour, are those passengers selected for the search. It's a system employed by Customs authorities, yet not our part of the equation. Security seems to be impeded by civil rights pressure groups concerned about certain ethnic groups being targeted. Whilst I have to accept that the issue exists, I have little time for the argument. Any law-abiding citizen should have no cause for complaint, especially these days, if they are selected for search for any reason providing that the search is conducted in a professional, courteous manner.

I am truly sympathetic to the large numbers of Muslim passengers who may feel unjustly picked upon. However, I would also expect members of the Islamic faith to be part of the process of ensuring that the minuscule numbers of extremists amongst them be deterred by the security system in place.

A bad gut feeling is part of the security process that we should all be encouraging.

Yet it is also a phenomena that seems to open up airlines and airports to being sued, especially if one finds nothing on the person so selected. One airline Captain recently told me that "even if I have severe doubts about a passenger who is acting suspiciously once on board an aircraft, doubts not resolved by either myself or my crew members speaking to him, I cannot realistically off-load him. The airline would be sued. Only if he were intoxicated, drugged or abusive could I do anything". Whilst we cannot have large numbers of passengers being denied boarding for profuse sweating, resulting in thyrotoxic, overweight and nervous fliers stranded, we must empower crew to make the final call as to the safety of the flight without fear of the legal process that could result in their own disciplinary procedure. The alternative is stark – that same suspicious passenger could, armed or not, become that disruptive passenger or hijacker that places the flight in peril. If a Captain has even the slightest concern over the airworthiness of his aircraft, that Captain can delay or can-

cel a flight, the same should be true if the concern is about a passenger.

However, the reality is that the industry does not seem ready to actively encourage selective screening, thus 100% standard passenger screening supplemented by random search appears the order of the day. If that is so, then let us ensure that random search does fulfil its desired outcome by dissuading the terrorist by means of instilling in him, or her, reasonable doubt that he, or she, will pass through the process without closer examination. For example, when the United Kingdom introduced 20% (1 in 5) random checks at the screening checkpoints, passengers did feel that at least there was a high probability of selection.

So, as the standards of security are beefed up world-wide and travellers within the United States are experiencing an enhanced security regime that has been standard in many parts of Europe for years, we should take heart yet avoid complacency. Much of what we do is deterrence, nowhere is this more the case than in random search procedure. ☉



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