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## Relaxing Restrictions on Knives: the daggers are out



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# OBJECTING TO KNIVES: when the heart rules the head

by Philip Baum

Rescinding the limitations on the carriage of small pocketknives on board aircraft was always going to be a challenge. Like so many other measures that the industry has introduced over the years, it is always easy to add security measures, yet far harder to take them away. The brouhaha that was initiated by the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) recent announcement that knives with blades shorter than 6cms, of a width less than 1.27cms at their widest point, without locking or fixed blades and without moulded handgrips will, from 25 April, be permitted in carry-on baggage was to be expected, especially in the United States in light of the fact that box cutters (which will remain banned) were used in the perpetration of the attacks on 11th September 2001.

The debate, which has become a huge political issue, emphasises three things. Firstly the problem with knee-jerk procedures being implemented as a response to a terrorist attack; secondly, the extent to which intelligent people fail to deploy common sense and allow their emotions to rule their decision-making processes; and thirdly, the frightening willingness of certain groups to hold onto politically acceptable security measures, such as the ban on knives, whilst rejecting effective, yet politically sensitive, security measures, such as profiling, whilst arguing the case that they are speaking on behalf of those who died in 2001.

The limitations currently in place are not in line with international standards, but a lack of such harmonisation is not a reason for taking items off the prohibited items list. Even though the quality of screening afforded passengers at American checkpoints is some of the worst in the western (and, in places, developing) world in terms of passenger experience and potential capability of identifying genuine threats, when it comes down to it most of the advances achieved in respect of global aviation security standards have been driven by the US. More relevant is the fact that there is little value in having unenforceable laws. The harsh reality is that most of the pocketknives which the TSA is now legitimising are only detectable through luck rather than through the proficiency of an X-ray operator. In other words, if a terrorist wished to infiltrate such knives onto an aircraft, they could do so with ease. The vast majority of such bladed items being confiscated from passengers at checkpoints are those inadvertently left inside briefcases and handbags where the passenger made no attempt to conceal them. Every time such a knife is found, screeners scent victory in having been able to identify a prohibited item, not for preventing the next terrorist atrocity. Do we really want our screeners to be distracted from potentially identifying the next threat?

Not only are pocketknives hard to detect, they are no more dangerous than a terrorist's bare hands, his (or her) shoelaces, belt, pen or a host of other everyday items which could be used to overpower crewmembers or passengers. Knives did not bring about the destruction of four airliners in 2001; it was the mindset of the perpetrators.

The many groups and politicians who have spoken out in horror at the lifting of the restrictions on pocketknives (and a range of other novelty bats and sporting equipment) either genuinely have no understanding of terrorist modus operandi or, more disturbingly, are trying to generate votes by spouting media savvy

**"...enabling them to overpower somebody who is armed with a bladed object which, granted criminal intent, they can infiltrate onto an aircraft whether or not pocketknives are on any prohibited items list..."**

sound bites. On the surface, of course it makes sense to restrict the carriage of bladed objects – they are sharp, can do damage and are not needed on board an aircraft – but the question is what is the cost of identifying such items? If the result is that we generate huge queues at security checkpoints, slow down passenger processing time, distract screeners from focussing on people who might not be carrying sharps but could well pose a threat to a flight, we have failed in meeting the core objectives of the aviation security regime. Furthermore, the argument that a pocketknife can become a lethal weapon in the hands of a psychologically disturbed passenger is flawed inasmuch as glass bottles of duty free liquor, glassware from meal trays and even plastic cutlery can be as dangerous, if not more so.

The only issue I have with the decision to relax the limitations is TSA Administrator Pistole's statement that, "A small pocket knife is simply not going to result in the catastrophic failure of an aircraft and an improvised explosive device will," If we really are more worried about explosives, why are we still routinely screening all passengers with archway metal detectors – which can detect knives carried on the person – rather than advanced imaging technologies which afford us the chance of detecting explosives? But that's another debate!

The Coalition of Flight Attendant Unions issued a leaflet stating that, "It makes no sense to choose between guarding against a hostile take-over attempt and an explosive device. We need to ensure air travel is secured against all threats to our safety and security. We believe the millions who travel expect to arrive safely – and it's our job to ensure it." I wish that such groups would speak out as vociferously in favour of profiling passengers...which does make sense...and mandating the training of flight attendants in both self defence and restraint techniques. The latter, grotesquely under-regulated, affords aircrew the chance of being able to live up to the mantra that "it is our job to ensure it" by enabling them to overpower somebody who is armed with a bladed object which, granted criminal intent, they can infiltrate onto an aircraft whether or not pocketknives are on any prohibited items list. ■

