



THE GLOBAL JOURNAL OF AIRPORT & AIRLINE SECURITY

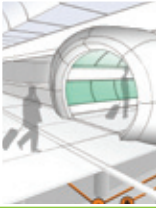
Human Trafficking: the aviation industry's moral responsibility

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50 MILLION PROHIBITED ITEMS CONFISCATED:

but how many passengers were denied boarding?

by Philip Baum

On 7th February 2012 John Pistole, the Administrator of the Transportation Security Administration, made a statement to the United States House of Representatives' Committee on Homeland Security (Subcommittee on Transportation Security). In it he said that the "TSA employs risk-based, intelligence-driven operations to prevent terrorist attacks" and that its goal was to "stay ahead of evolving terrorist threats while protecting passengers' privacy and facilitating the secure and efficient flow of legitimate commerce".

It may be that the powers-that-be genuinely believe these claims and aspirations are true and being achieved. After all, as Pistole continues, his employees have "safely screened more than 5 billion passengers since TSA was created", and over the past decade "have confiscated approximately 50 million prohibited items, and last year alone prevented more than 1,200 guns from being brought onto passenger aircraft."

Sadly, I do not agree. I do not believe that we are deploying a risk-based aviation security system and we are, as a global community, certainly not staying ahead of evolving threats. Ask screeners about the training they have had in the identification of chemical or biological weapons; or, perhaps don't as the answer is somewhat disturbing. As to the claims of confiscating 50 million prohibited items in the United States, how many of them were ever going to be used in an attack against aviation? And the very fact that, amazingly, in excess of 1,200 guns were identified at US checkpoints in 2011, usually in the baggage of Americans that 'forgot' that's where they kept their firearm, means that we are not doing a particularly good job at getting the general public to think security before they set out on their journeys. I am delighted that the firearms were detected, but let's face it, if X-ray operators can't find a firearm, what hope do they have of finding the type of weapon a hijacker might actually use in 2012?

It is also lamentable that, when summarising TSA 'finds', Pistole failed to report how many passengers had been denied boarding because of their intoxicated state or unusual behaviour, or how many people were identified carrying falsified travel documents. Such figures could provide an inkling as to how the agency had acted on the ground to avoid problems in the air. Stopping an inebriated passenger, to me at least, is far better than confiscating a 250ml bottle of Ambre Solaire sun tan lotion.

The TSA's own website extols its 'Top 10 Good Catches of 2011'. The list includes snakes, turtles and birds found in Miami, inert landmines found in Salt Lake City, a stun gun disguised as a smart phone in Los Angeles and small chunks of C4 found in checked baggage in Yuma. Again, bravo for the finds, but citing these as

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the 'Top 10' opens the TSA to ridicule. One only has to read some of the comments posted on the site to sense that confidence in the TSA's performance is not high. The number of high profile errors of judgement – failing to confiscate marijuana and leaving the passenger a note saying "C'mon son" instead; searching colostomy bags; confiscating cupcakes; writing a note to a woman who was carrying a vibrator in her luggage telling her to "Get your freak on, girl!"; mistaking an insulin pump for a possible IED; finding potential pipe bombs and then not summoning the police or bomb squad – does little to inspire confidence in the agency to safeguard passengers from real terrorist attacks. Results of covert tests of the screening system were released in 2006 and indicated a potential 70% failure rate; whilst the situation has almost certainly improved since then, the absence of evidence to support that assumption is in itself disturbing.

As always, it's easy to criticise. Pistole is in an unenviable position of having to make statements to reassure government and the general public. Thankfully, due to the very limited number of actual terrorist attacks, hard evidence that demonstrates the agency's effectiveness is in short supply. Furthermore, it is easier to take pot shots at the TSA than at its counterparts elsewhere around the globe because of the excessive media scrutiny it has to contend with and the sheer size of the security operation.

But, if you put your head above the parapet you have to take the flak. Complacency is not an option. Whilst we can try and pretend that we have the right calibre people on the front line, and make proclamations about 'staying ahead of the threat' and 'being risk-based', most readers would, I believe, agree that this will only be achieved through a broad acceptance of the need to differentiate between passengers, paying screeners a wage that unequivocally demonstrates their value to a nation's security (and thereby attracting better candidates), training personnel in a far broader curriculum that enables them to comprehend both the multi-cultural environment in which they operate and the future threats they may encounter, and ensuring that they work in a highly disciplined, zero tolerance regime where failure is not an option. Confiscating 50 million prohibited items is nothing to be proud of; preventing the next terrorist attack is. ■

