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# Dawson's Field Skyjackings:

lessons on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

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# EASING LOCKDOWN'S EASEMENT:

## THE LESSON FROM AVIATION SECURITY HISTORY

by Philip Baum

This September marks the 50th anniversary of the multiple hijacking of aircraft to Dawson's Field in Jordan by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The atrocity provided one of the most iconic and renowned images from aviation security history, the PFLP having ensured the world's media were on hand to record the simultaneous destruction of the TWA, Swissair and BOAC aircraft on, what they called, their 'Revolutionary Airstrip'.

As Jonathan Zimmerli points out in his more detailed analysis of the incident in this issue of *Aviation Security International (ASI)*, one of the reasons behind the successful hijacking of these three aircraft, and a Pan Am aircraft that was flown to Cairo, can be attributed to airlines' "strong resistance towards extended and upgraded security controls" which had been recommended. The Israeli airline, El Al, had adopted a more stringent security stance and, as a result, the hijackers were unsuccessful in their attempt to seize their flight from Amsterdam to New York that same day.

The industry has long been branded 'reactive' and resistant to bringing in proactive measures to counter known vulnerabilities. Rather than assessing risk based on intelligence analysis, the bean counters often opt to determine the appropriate response to a given threat based on post-disaster media imagery – of the aircraft at Dawson's Field, of Captain John

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Testrake with a gun against his head on TWA flight 847, of the wreckage of Pan Am Flight 103 at Lockerbie, and of aircraft flying into the World Trade Center. Only with such photographic 'proof' of threat will they embrace meaningful change, in part because they need the general public's buy-in prior to enhancing security measures. The problem with the reliance on disaster footage to 'sell' the need for security is that, by definition, a tragedy has had to have occurred; unsuccessful plots do not generate emotionally powerful visual statements. This can be a frustration for airlines' security management teams keen to better mitigate threats and vulnerabilities they know exist.

Even then, as the years pass after an attack, there is often a desire to water down the more stringent changes initially recommended. Following the Lockerbie bombing in 1988, the US Presidential Commission on Aviation Security and Terrorism found the system to be "seriously flawed" and in need of "major reform". The airlines, however, were resistant to many of the recommendations, citing cost. They then embarked on lobbying campaigns which cost eye-watering sums of money, many of which were opposing security measures. After the loss of TWA Flight 800 in 1996 (allegedly due to a spark in the fuel tank), the Gore Commission was established, also with a remit to look at aviation security. Many of their findings replicated those of the previous commission.

But lessons were not learned. According to Andrew Thomas, in his book *Aviation Insecurity*, "of the fifty recommendations made by the [Gore] Commission, nearly all were eventually watered down, delayed or



simply never considered by the FAA". Thomas provides an excellent example of this: "The Gore Commission recommended several ways that the performance of airport screening companies could be improved, including establishing a national job grade structure for screeners", as well as, "not hiring screening companies on the sole basis of being the lowest bidder." Thomas highlights that the FAA response, "was to maintain the current system of allowing cost, not performance, to be the final determinant as to which screening company would be used by the airlines." Similarly shocking, finance-based objections were cited in opposition to recommendations relating to employee background checks.

And then came 9/11...and another commission. Aside from the human tragedy, and the sudden global realisation as to the depths certain elements of society could sink, the attacks once again served to demonstrate, as the 9/11 Commission points out, "the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management." On a single day, as in 1970, attempts had been made to hijack four aircraft. Despite all the evidence that suicidal terrorism was in existence prior to 11th September 2001, and that aviation was an intended target, scant attention had been directed towards America's woeful domestic aviation security capability.

Eight years on, and in the aftermath of the attempted destruction of a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit by the 'Underpants Bomber', Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, in 2009, we found that many of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations had either been abandoned or were still a work in progress. And, in terms of risk assessment, President Obama himself famously stated that, despite the prevalence of a multitude of suspicious signs, we had "failed to connect those dots." It was, he said, "not a failure to collect intelligence; it was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had."

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Readers would be justified in accusing me of exclusively focusing on the US response to attacks. The problem is that the global aviation community only changes when America does, and America only acts when its interests are demonstrably targeted. Where, for example, was the global response to the meatgrinder plot against an Etihad flight out of Sydney in 2017? Where was the industry-wide change in flight deck security protocols in the aftermath of the Germanwings disaster caused by suicidal pilot, Andreas Lubitz, in 2015? How often have attacks against aviation interests in China or Russia led to global change? Yes, from time to time some countries introduce new countermeasures, but we only witness wholesale revamping of our security protocols if the US says so. Why, for example, are powders (and associated powders, liquids, aerosols and gels – 'PLAGs' – restrictions) only regional? Given its history of being reactive, maybe it is high time for others to call the shots and the US be forced to comply?

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And here we are today, in 2020, living in uncertain times, with the global economy in freefall, job losses stacking up, companies going to the wall and, worst of all, people dying in their hundreds of thousands. Coronavirus. It's not a security threat, but its impact on the aviation industry dwarfs that of 9/11. Yet, whilst it may not be a security challenge, we do need to learn the security lessons of the past. And it is abundantly clear that this is one area where we should not be following America's lead as their pandemic management has been a case study in malpractice rather than best practice.

We cannot allow ourselves to be driven by the bean counters, however worthy their attempts may be to save jobs, or even airlines themselves, in the short term. We must not fail to connect the dots. We cannot work in silos. We need to ensure that future generations do not accuse us of having a failure of imagination.

My own business is completely dependent on the prosperity of the aviation industry and, as such, we have been knocked for six by the impact of the pandemic. As specialists in behavioural analysis for the enhancement of security for the transport industry and in other crowded places, such as tourist attractions, sports stadia and beaches, there is little surprise that we are not being inundated with orders for classroom training courses. There are no crowded places! Yet, despite my wanting to see aircraft filled to capacity and beaches heaving with sun worshippers, I'm actually opposed to the resumption of charter flights to resorts and feel that those who book them are behaving selfishly. But, if governments sanction them – and they are due to the lobbying efforts going on behind the scenes – people will go.

Airlines themselves may be able to create relatively safe environments for their passengers, but they are also facilitating the spread of a virus; not intentionally, but by the very nature of their operations. States that have managed to reduce infection rates have done so by trying to limit travel, even between suburbs, let alone between countries, to an absolute minimum. Many of us live in 'bubbles' where there is no indication of the virus spreading, but we are also seeing that, as lockdowns ease, virus transmission is increasing. Within our own communities, the virus is manageable, but as soon as we allow, or even encourage, cross-mingling we lose such control.

So, yes, airlines are to be applauded for their efforts to ensure a sanitised environment for us to be transported in, but they only provide the vehicle, not the complete experience. Passengers still have to move through airports and, as we see from social media output, many of the smaller airports simply cannot ensure social distancing; nor can the ground transportation networks, and nor can many of the resorts themselves. By definition, we go on vacation in order to get away from our normal lives and home environment. We meet new people. We burst the bubble.





Whilst I empathise with the plight of the airlines, hotels and other facets of the tourist economy – and of course their staff – we do not exist in a silo. The longer the pandemic has a grip on society, the longer the economic impact. Smaller businesses cannot survive the yo-yo impact of lockdown-easement-lockdown-easement and all the uncertainty that goes along with that approach. Some airlines may indeed collapse as a result of a more prolonged, yet effective, lockdown, but if we look at the big picture more jobs, and more lives, will be saved.

We are keen – no, desperate – for a return to normality but we cannot pretend that international travel is as safe as we are claiming. Flights need to operate, but for necessary reasons. Not vacations. Travellers who can't resist the overseas beach have only themselves to blame if quarantine measures are introduced should pandemic infection rates demand a change in regulation. And insurers should certainly not have to pay out for interrupted vacation plans – disruption was predictable and there is no reason why future premiums should be further inflated by the actions of irresponsible travellers.

From a British perspective, I am fed up with politicians applauding the British public for their efforts and relying on their common sense rather than on an effective enforcement regime. What common sense?

And, in the UK, what enforcement regime? I see little sign of either. I've just nipped out to a local shop to buy my lunchtime meal deal – five other customers in the store and only one with a face mask, despite it being the law to do so! And not a single person I know who has travelled has been checked on during their mandatory quarantine period. Many colleagues overseas can attest to far more frequent and vigorous controls being in place. If we are going to have rules, let's make sure they are effective – if we don't, the law-abiding citizens will suffer, along with the economy as a whole, whilst the selfish will party at everyone else's expense.

I have long advocated for common-sense security – making intelligent decisions based on the circumstances one faces. Yet, there has been so much about the management of this pandemic that had defied logic. In the UK, that started with – as the Home Affairs Select Committee confirmed as this issue of ASI was going to press – the delayed introduction of quarantine measures in the early days of the pandemic when we could see the virus was accelerating. We can see now that the trend is going in the wrong direction, yet we continue to ease the lockdown. That might be essential locally for people's mental health, but not to the point of encouraging people to enter the melting pot of humanity that exists at airports and on board international flights.



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There are a multitude of reasons why people do need to fly and I have no wish to see states become prisons with no means of escape. Our citizens do need to travel to see relatives and loved ones overseas, especially if they are elderly or frail; they may have to participate in business meetings which cannot be achieved via Zoom yet which are essential to the viability of their company going forward; and, some may even be fortunate enough to have second homes which need tending to (and where social distancing is as easy as at home). But the traditional city break, or overseas or inter-state beach vacation is not essential travel in 2020. And nor is any mass gathering event that brings together people from different communities, be it a sports tournament, music festival, trade show, protest, carnival or parade.

Yes, I'm frustrated. Yes, our business is suffering. Yes, it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. But yes, I have had COVID-19 and it is not a pleasant experience and, consequently, yes I believe that those fortunate enough to be able to afford an overseas holiday this year ought to be 'staycationers' and holiday at home.

For those readers in the UK, we have an abundance of historic sites, golden beaches, visitor attractions and beauty spots. A new one I've only recently heard of is a place called Barnard Castle!

Business is about money, but throughout history many lives have been lost due to putting finance above safety and security. Blinkered, protectionist viewpoints may save jobs within a certain sector, but with all our loved ones' lives at stake, perhaps the best lesson the past has taught us is that risk management is about taking decisions that may not be commercially welcome in the short-term, but preserve lives in the long-term. The powerful imagery associated with the current pandemic – of PPE-wearing nurses caring for those struggling to breath in intensive care units, of mass funerals, and of deserted city centres – may not specifically relate to aviation, but if we fail to recognise that strict physical distancing is a necessity today, the impact on airlines, airports and the travel industry will be all the more bleak for the future. ■

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