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Special Article: Outline on Status of Post-9/11 Aviation Security Initiatives, Part I

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Abstract. This article provides a commentary in an outline format on post-9/11 aviation security initiatives within the United States (US).

I. Most post-9/11 aviation security initiatives have little antiterrorism and counterterrorism value related to the nature of the aviation terrorism threat implicated in the 9/11 terrorist attacks within the US. There are several reasons for this.

A. There were and continue to be psychological pressures to do something--to do anything--to deal with the aviation security threat regardless of the nature of that threat. The pressures include the needs to construct meaning out of lack of meaning or to create a more comforting meaning, including a worldview that the world is predictable in a specific direction and can be intentionally modified in a desirable fashion.

B. There were and continue to be political pressures affecting deliberations on conceptions of the threat and of the response to the threat. Thus, threat assessment is dependent on the political needs of individuals, groups, organizations, governments. At Issue is career success, organizational turf battles between and within government agencies, and the like.

C. There were and continue to be economic pressures affecting deliberations on conceptions of the threat and of the response to threat. Thus, threat assessment is dependent on the economic needs of industry, the government, and individual citizens and residents. At Issue are opportunities for profit and threats of profit loss--also impacts on budgets, styles of life, and so on.

D. All three classes of pressures seem to be permeated by a belief in the magic of technology and a belief that any problem can be fixed. Both of these beliefs may be a significant and peculiar part of some putative US national character.

II. But post-9/11 aviation security initiatives have not been a total loss as to aviation security value.

A. Instead of reinforcement of an on-board (the aircraft) culture mandating the slavish following of a passive, cooperative stance in the face of terrorist and other security threat, there has arisen the notion of an activist, competitive stance and even the more valuable notion of situation-specific rules of engagement for aircrew and passengers.

B. Many post-9/11 aviation security initiatives do provide a deterrent and a countering value to certain other kinds of aviation terrorism and security problems unrelated to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. These include threats from unsophisticated (not so much in technology but in thought process) terrorist entities, from psychologically disturbed individuals (usually not coherent terrorists), and from so-called non-political criminals.

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C. Most post-9/11 aviation security initiatives furnished and continue to furnish much-needed reassurance to the general public.

III. There are several aviation security conceptions and initiatives that must be embraced to deal with terrorist threats posed by terrorist entities implicated in the 9/11 attacks and related past and contemplated attacks against US national interests worldwide.

A. Even if the entire US federal budget was applied towards aviation security, there would still not be perfect security, nor would there be resources for any other government function.

B. There needs to be an upgrade in human and technical intelligence capabilities geared towards the terrorist threat.

1. The human intelligence upgrade would involve the continuation of hiring, training, and valuing personnel with diverse ethnicity and experience and with requisite abilities and motivations.

2. The technical intelligence upgrade would involve the continuation of furthering technical collection capabilities while decreasing the shortfall in analytic capabilities to optimally mine collected data.

3. Intelligence data--raw, analyzed, and produced--must be placed in integrated data repositories and must be transmitted to aviation security personnel in a responsive, secure, and continuous fashion.

C. Aviation security procedures must reflect the nature of the security threat and must be ever-changing as the threat reflected in intelligence also is ever-changing.

D. The "magic" attributed to isolated technological fixes must be jettisoned in favor of systems perspectives including the human element. In a conflict between the magic of technology and the human problem of the wretched of the earth--the latter encompassing people who believe themselves to be justly activated towards terrorism--the latter ultimately will retain the advantage. And the same could be written about transportation security, homeland security and defense, a war on terrorism with global reach, and national security.

IV. Strengths and weakness of aviation security initiatives should be identified and analyzed based on the context described in I through III above.

A. Biometrics and Reconnaissance/Surveillance Technology.

1. One technology problem encompasses effecting adequate detection and registration of data and suitable levels of specification. Another encompasses matching of obtained data to pre-existing databases with acceptable false positive and false negative error rates.

2. A related intelligence Issue is obtaining accurate data for the databases. Here accuracy is defined not only by technical specifications but also by the psychological status of the people from whom data are collected. This latter point encompasses the complexity that people change their psychological status from trusted to untrusted, from good to evil and back again. Knowing who a person is physically may be worthless or very misleading without knowing who they are as people.

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3. A related operational Issue is integrating appropriate security procedures reactive to biometric technology process in a manner that is efficacious and minimally disruptive to airport and aviation initiatives.

4. Another related Issue involves civil liberties implications of data management and employment.

5. Finally, the notion of identification of motivation or intent in a general public environment through psychophysiological or psychophysical status--e.g., voice stress analysis--is not associated with acceptable scientific foundations in most common scenarios.

B. Technology-Based Baggage Screening.

1. Any device is inherently constrained by technical limitations in what can and what will be detected.

2. The surveillance/reconnaissance/research of sophisticated terrorist entities facilitate obtaining knowledge of technical parameters of any device.

3. The integration of devices into airport operations and the ongoing maintenance costs and consideration of the human element require more analysis in generating hypotheses and tentative conclusions about screening effectiveness. Hypotheses and conclusions may well change continuously as "the real world" changes continuously.

4. A large variety of terrorist operations can still be effected before passengers and terrorists (who may be passengers) and their materiel arrive at screening sites--even with the institution of passenger-to-baggage matching and even concerning terrorists and other threats who are not suicidal.

C. Profiling--as applied to passengers and personnel throughout airports and locales of aviation.

1. A definition of profiling is the development of theories about one or more individuals, groups, or larger entities concerning differential traits and ultimately differential behavior. This phenomenon is intrinsic to human psychology. One can't not do it--except through anomalies such as self-talk techniques that degrade in operational compliance through time or through forced random checks at airports that only make sense if random checks afford better security results than a profiling system.

2. Profiling at times is equated with so-called racial profiling, but race may not be a valid biological concept but instead a reflection of social theories about the causes or indicators of actual or putative differences between, among, and within people.

3. One problem in profiling development is the acceptance of a priori indicators without suitable research. For example, the acceptance of criminal misdemeanors or felonies as predictors or terrorist behavior affects the validity of background investigations which themselves are reflections of profiles.

4. Profiles should be developed based on a combination of common epistemological devices informed through statistics--reason, logic, empiricism, experimentalism, faith, authority--that demonstrate the predictive validity of a putative indicator in terms of the manifestation of a problematic behavior.

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Developing and effecting a profiling system is a matter of continuous activity based on an ongoing analysis of predictive validity.

5. Public policy on profiling should be dependent on a consensus concerning "acceptable" rates of false positive and negative error rates and concerning the notion of politically acceptable criteria--e.g., skin color, religious affiliation, travel history, social association, etc.

(To be concluded in the next Issue of IBPP) (Keywords: Aviation Security, Biometrics, Profiling, Baggage Screening.)

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