

“We Can Protect Airplanes and Privacy Better,” with Robert E. Smith, 12/31/09

The interrupted terrorist attack over Detroit should be the occasion to improve anti-terrorism policies and technologies, while preserving privacy protections.

First, there need to be better ways beforehand to “connect the dots” – in this case rather obvious dots –that the arrested suspect left. His father’s warnings to American consulate officials, paying cash for an expensive trip, being listed in England’s watch list, and checking no luggage on an international flight should have led to his being questioned and searched more intensely. These sensible steps need to become policy.

That Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, like the World Trade Center hijackers, traveled under his own name should have made preventing his act easier. Still, a sound airline security system ought not to depend on a wrongdoer providing accurate identity information. Privacy advocates, rather than resisting sensible solutions, have urged for years that U.S. transportation safety efforts focus on what persons bring with them, not on what their names or identities are. In such a revised strategy, it wouldn’t matter whether a person displays a “valid government-issued ID.” Connecting the dots among individuals whose behaviors raise suspicion provides objective bases for further investigation and intervention.

Second, we shouldn’t expect that technology is a magic wand. Those technologies that are targeted can be improved (and still protect the dignity of travelers). The explosive-detecting “puffer” systems, deployed earlier at Midway and other airports should not be abandoned, but improved and used discreetly. The machines are dependent on calibration that can be upgraded and then redeployed. In detecting chemicals, the devices do not unnecessarily violate a passenger’s privacy nor unduly inconvenience them.

Third, similar explosive detection systems can also be deployed along with the smoke detectors in airplane bathrooms, with especially sensitive flights at first and then more widely. They can serve as deterrents and detections against incidents like the first Detroit flight this month. They can also create the possibility of distinguishing the distressed passenger on the second flight.

Fourth, the so-called backscatter, “virtual strip search” technology, can prove effective. They may not necessarily have detected the explosive on Christmas Day in Amsterdam because of the small amount and flat angle. But these machines can be developed to alarm, like metal detectors, and highlight when they bounce off metals and dangerous chemicals. They should be employed respectfully at security checkpoints, and so far the Transportation Security Administration has done neither.

Fifth, we can accelerate a program to inspect cargo. The Bush Administration officials who used the news talk shows during the holiday season to propose anti-terrorism solutions resisted for eight years proposals by Members of Congress to try to screen all cargo on passenger flights. This is hardly disruptive at all to passenger travel and is less expensive than passenger screening. By focusing on databases and demands for identification, the TSA underplays the real

danger that cargo underneath the passenger compartment can cause a disastrous explosion in mid-air. Currently half the cargo on passenger flights is not screened for explosives.

Six, huge databases or “watch lists” are of limited value because not all potential terrorists are known or will travel under their own names. Those people intent on bringing mayhem to the U.S. but have no prior records, by definition, would not be included in the database. The Transportation Security Administration has three lists. The Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment [TIDE] is the list on which the name Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab appears, along with half a million other assorted characters.

The “selectee” list of about 15,000 requires more thorough searches that might or might not have found the explosives. The more crucial “no fly list,” which has about 2500 names, did not have that name on it. The third list is the one that TSA should be perfecting. Running the names of American travelers through the TIDE list of mostly overseas suspects seems like searching for a needle in a haystack.

As security experts from Israel and elsewhere discovered years ago, it is much more effective and privacy protective to investigate and pursue the truly dangerous few before they get to the airports. The current “Secure Flight” system requiring birthdates and gender to get reservations, in essence, requires government permission to travel for all two million persons who travel in the U.S. each day, all to search a database of mostly obscure non-English names and obsolete references.

So let’s focus on using the information that is presented about potential threats, requiring additional screening for those travelers who act like potential terrorists, and using technology and effective manpower to screen out things, not persons, getting on airplanes. That protects us all as travelers and respects our privacy.