

Proactive Helplessness | Lexington Universal Circuit

Photo by "Gietje"

Thesis: This column discusses the systemic failure revolving around the Christmas Day bombing incident.



The Northwest Airlines Flight 253 bombing attempt, now known as the Christmas Day bombing attempt, shows us a situation in which all parties involved have remarkably failed. As someone who will be flying from New York to Arizona in early January, my optimism from going from 37° to 73° is disturbed by the knowledge that I am no safer in the air now than as I would have been on September 10th, 2001. The singular question asked about this incident is “Who messed up?” That list is longer than you think.

The only person out of this entire incident who acted and reacted properly and as a hero, was Jasper Schuringa, the Dutch passenger who tackled and overpowered the suspect. Of all the headache from air travel, none of the security measures did a thing to prevent the bombing. Jasper demonstrated that as rulers of our own fate, we have the most power in stopping potential terrorists.

1. Schiphol Airport (Amsterdam, Netherlands) and Northwest Airlines, for failing to properly screen Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the would-be bomber. Not only was he able to pass through the security checks, but Kurt Haskell, a confirmed passenger of the flight, witnessed Umar board the plane without a passport.

2. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for engaging in security theater, which is the practice of adopting security counter-measures intended to provide the feeling of improved security, while doing almost nothing to actually improve security.

According to the New York Times, flights are now federally mandated to prohibit passengers from moving out of their seats during the last hour of a flight even if the passenger needs to use the restroom, which has already caused problems for flights that last only an hour. In addition, there is a good chance of needing to use it as the December 27th incident shows us, in which a man was thought to be a terrorist when he occupied the restroom for more than an hour and was verbally abusive to the crew ordering him out. It was later determined that he was a businessman who had fallen ill from food poisoning during the flight.

In addition to this policy, pillows and blankets are also prohibited in the last hour of a flight. It seems that they want me to be as uncomfortable as possible without actually making me safer. Why does the government follow this tradition of reactionary policy making, especially when none of these prohibitions would have done anything to prevent the bombing attempt? The would-be bomber was *in* his seat when he tried to detonate the explosive and the passenger who took him down got *out* of his seat to do it. In addition, the fire cause by the would-be bomber was put out by *blankets*, which are now limited. Furthermore, the restrictions for the last hour of the flight is meaningless for a terrorist who would bring down the plane at any point it is in the air.

Not content, the government wants passengers to die from boredom. Flights are now required to provide “no movies, no tv, no xm radio” according to a Jetblue audio recording. Even electronics that do not give signals are prohibited. There is no entertainment available other than a book. Airports are also restricting passengers to one carry-on each, even though the would-be bomber had no luggage.

The TSA equates hassle with safety. Empirically speaking, the best line of defense against airplane terrorism is the presence of alert and informed passengers.

3. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, for failing to detonate a bomb properly, causing no damage to the plane while setting himself on fire, suffering third-degree burns in the process.

The truth behind the War on Terror is that there are not as many terrorists as the war would have you believe. Since 9/11, we have only encountered lone cranks who fancy themselves holy warriors, but they are not terrorists. But “terrorist” has such a nice ring to it. The same way a successful film gives rise to B-grade imitations, the 9/11 attacks have prompted amateur attempts. This is why I refer to Umar as a would-be bomber, rather than a terrorist because he was trying to fulfill his own ego instead of solely carrying out a political message.

Aside from improperly detonating the bomb, causing him to catch fire, the would-be bomber was also unintelligent enough to use 80 grams of pentaerythritol tetranite (PETN), a powerful explosive, but as a bomb, it is difficult to detonate properly. According to ABC News, a government test indicated that 50 grams of PETN is sufficient to bring down an airliner, yet it has yet to be successfully detonated. Richard Reid, the “Shoe Bomber”, also tried to detonate PETN in an American Airlines flight in December 2001.

4. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a knock-off brand, for taking responsibility for this failed attack. Unless the goal was mass inconvenience, it should not lay claim to failure.

Conclusion: Life can be unpredictable at times. At the mercy of faceless government entities and terrorist organizations overseas, it is difficult to assess the the gap between the perceived threat and the real threat. Yet in a political environment

that has not yet fully recovered from terrorist attacks in 2001, passengers on planes recognize that they should place less trust in the government and more trust in themselves.

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