

Schneier on Security

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Small Planes and Lone Terrorist Nutcases

A *Washington Post* article [concludes](#) that small planes are not the next terror threat: Pilots of private planes fly about 200,000 small and medium-size aircraft in the United States, using 19,000 airports, most of them small. The planes' owners say the aircraft have little in common with airliners.

"I don't see a gaping security hole here," said Tom Walsh, an aviation security consultant. "In terms of aviation security, there are much bigger fish to fry than worrying [about] small aircraft."

He said most would-be terrorists would draw the same conclusion -- that tiny aircraft don't pack a big enough punch. Planes like the one Stack flew weigh just a few thousands pounds and carry no more than 100 gallons of fuel. A Boeing 767 weighs 400,000 pounds and carries up to 25,000 gallons.

Richard L. Skinner, inspector general of the Department of Homeland Security, reviewed security at several general-aviation airports last year and concluded that general aviation "presents only limited and mostly hypothetical threats to security."

What this analysis misses is our ability to terrorize ourselves. After all, who thought that a failed terrorist incident -- nobody hurt, no plane crash, terrorist in custody -- could cause so much terror?

On the face of it, Joseph Stack [flying a private plane](#) into the Austin, TX IRS office is no different than [Nidal Hasan](#) shooting up Ft. Hood: a lone extremist nutcase. If one is a terrorist and the other is a criminal, the difference is [more political or religious](#) than anything else.

Personally, I wouldn't call either a terrorist. Nor would I call Amy Bishop, who [opened fire](#) on her department after she was denied tenure, a terrorist.

I consider both [Theodore Kaczynski](#) (the Unibomber) and [Bruce Ivans](#) (the anthrax mailer) to be terrorists, but [John Muhammad and Lee Malvo](#) (the DC snipers) to be criminals. Clearly there is grey area.

I note that the primary counterterrorist measures I advocate -- investigation and intelligence - - can't possibly make a difference against any of these people. Lone nuts are pretty much impossible to detect in advance, and thus pretty much impossible to defend against: a point Cato's Jim Harper made in a smart [series of posts](#). And once they attack, conventional police work is how we capture those that simply don't care if they're caught or killed.

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