



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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Ten Years After 9/11: The Next Wave in Aviation Security

Chairman Joe Lieberman

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Good morning and welcome to our hearing. Today we will take stock of our efforts over the past 10 years to secure aviation travel, and to discuss where we must go from here to make the system more secure, more efficient, and, if possible, more convenient for the majority of travelers, without diminishing security.

I want to thank TSA Administrator John Pistole, who has spent a lifetime in service to the security of our nation, and our other witnesses for being here today.

Today is the 11th and final hearing in our Committee's yearlong, "Ten Years After 9/11" series examining reforms made over the last decade to government operations that failed us in the years leading up to 9/11.

Most of the reforms we've examined – from intelligence coordination, to preventing terrorists from entering the country, to emergency communications – have improved significantly since 9/11. But the risks we face today have changed significantly since 9/11. So, the successes we have had in the war on terror - including the strikes against Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki, and numerous plots against our homeland that have been thwarted – do not diminish the need to carry on our efforts to stay one step ahead of our enemies' changing plans for attacking us.

Aviation security was, of course, one of the greatest failures that enabled the Islamist terrorists to attack us on 9/11. And air travel remains on our terrorist enemies' top list of priorities for attack. Therefore aviation security is one of the first areas we set out to fix. Congress moved quickly in the fall of 2001 to close the most glaring security gaps. We immediately hardened cockpit doors to prevent hijackings. We created the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to replace private sector airport screeners with federal employees who would be held to strict security standards.

TSA revamped the way passengers were screened, and adapted again and again as terrorists tried to defeat the latest security measure TSA put into place. When Richard Reid tried to ignite explosives in his sneakers aboard an airplane in 2002, TSA asked passengers to remove their shoes for screening. When a plot was uncovered in 2006 to blow up planes with liquid explosives, TSA restricted liquids brought on board planes. When the Christmas Day bomber tried to blow up a plane with well-concealed plastic explosives in 2009, TSA stepped up its physical pat downs of passengers and increased the use of whole body imaging machines. And when terrorists tried to pack a bomb in a toner cartridge to be placed onboard a cargo plane, TSA limited the amount of ink or toner that can be transported on cargo planes.

TSA screens 2 million air passengers and their luggage each day using technology that continues to improve— from metal detectors to backscatter x-rays to explosives trace detectors to whole-body imaging machines. Since 9/11, DHS has also improved its ability to prescreen passenger lists against government watchlists and use behavioral profiling to detect passengers with evil intentions before they board a plane. The Department has also increased the number of Federal Air Marshals on domestic and international flights, and continues to work closely with our foreign partners to raise screening standards for flights originating abroad.

Cargo security, too, has been improved greatly since 9/11. All cargo on domestic passenger flights is screened before loading. On international flights, cargo details were not required until after a plane had taken off, but before it arrived in the U.S. The printer and ink cartridge plot, however, rendered that timeline meaningless. Clearly, we need to obtain shipping data before the departure of any international flight heading to the U.S. if we are to stop cargo bombs.

For that reason, DHS has begun working with shippers and air carriers to obtain descriptions of cargo earlier in the process so the Department can determine the risk and therefore the type of screening needed. Senator Collins and I are working on legislation that would require data to be collected on all cargo shipments before they are loaded onto planes, so that we can be assured that all high risk cargo can be screened properly before it is airborne.

The past decade has seen dramatic improvement in our aviation security. We have spent billions of dollars building multi-layered defense systems to prevent terrorists and explosives from getting on airplanes. And though we have improved security significantly, we seem to be better at playing catch up, reacting to the most recent terrorist tactic, rather than anticipating what might come next, and putting appropriate safeguards in place.

In order to avoid another “failure of imagination”, as the 9/11 Commission warned in its 2004 report, DHS and TSA need to think creatively about better uses of technology and information in the screening process.

So, the focus of my questions for our witnesses today is how can we better address the vulnerabilities that remain in our aviation security systems and how can we make the system more efficient and convenient without jeopardizing security?

Senator Collins?