



*Association of Professional Flight Attendants*

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*Proudly Representing the **Flight Attendants** of American Airlines*

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Office of the President

**Testimony to US House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on  
Transportation Security**

**“TSA’s efforts to Advance Risk-Based Security: Stakeholder Perspectives”  
April 11, 2013**

**Introduction**

Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Richmond, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit the following testimony. Furthermore, thank you very much for your recent strong statements regarding TSA’s policy making process. Although we may not all agree on the recently announced change in the prohibited items list, I believe there is bipartisan agreement that the decision-making process did not include input from each critical stakeholder. I appreciate your support in holding TSA accountable for this oversight.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, changed the commercial aviation industry, and the flight attendant profession in particular, dramatically and forever. The protocols and security measures that were instituted after those tragic events had one single intention: to keep us all safe. On March 5, 2013, Administrator John Pistole of the Transportation Security Administration announced a policy change that would once again allow knives of a certain size on board aircraft departing from US airports. The policy is ostensibly justified by the ‘risk-based analysis’ this hearing seeks to better understand. Although we support risk-based security and the periodic review of TSA’s prohibited items list, the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, representing over 16,000 American Airlines employees, vehemently rejects the TSA’s attempt to make such a sweeping policy change without the input of key stakeholders. As first responders and the final layer of security on board the aircraft, flight crews are critical resources and should be involved in TSA’s decision making process. Had flight attendants and others been involved from an early point in the discussion, Administrator Pistole would not have arrived at such an ill-advised conclusion.

**The 9/11 Commission Report**

The official report of the events leading up to the attacks of September 11, 2001, details, to the extent possible, the tactics employed by the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks. According to

the report, which references the heroic efforts of American Airlines Flight Attendants Betty Ong and Amy Sweeney to relay information to the ground throughout the hijacking, the terrorists used knives to stab passengers and flight attendants and gain entry to the flight deck.

Among the passengers stabbed on American Airlines Flight 11 was Daniel Lewin who had served four years as an officer in the Israeli military. Despite his training, he was stabbed and incapacitated while attempting to stop two of the hijackers who had been seated in front of him in first class.

Small knives and pepper spray irritants were the weapons employed by the hijackers. APFA remains convinced that such weapons, in the hands of highly motivated, coordinated, and trained criminals, pose a significant threat to the security of an entire airplane. There is no justifiable reason to allow small knives into airplane cabins.

### **TSA's Mission**

In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act which was signed into law by President Bush in November 2001. According to the Act, the function of TSA is to secure all modes of transportation. This is reflected in the following statement from the agency's website:

“Today, more than a decade since its creation, TSA has grown and evolved yet remains committed to its mission. The agency employs a risk-based, intelligence-driven, multi-layered strategy to secure U.S. transportation systems, working closely with stakeholders in aviation, rail, transit, highway, and pipeline sectors, as well as the partners in the law enforcement and intelligence community.” (“September 11, 2001 and TSA.” Web. 17 March 2013)

In the opinion of the APFA, the TSA has completely vacated its mission and obligations with regard to this policy decision. Not only does the introduction of knives to the airplane cabin put US transportation systems at risk, but the policy decision was made without any input from aviation stakeholders. Flight attendants were not consulted on the issue and APFA was not informed of the decision until the day of its announcement. The mechanism for robust stakeholder input exists in TSA's Aviation Security Advisory Committee. Members of the ASAC include a flight attendant, pilots, and members of this hearing's witness panel and their colleagues. If such a committee exists, it must be to play a role in the policymaking process at TSA. The failure to consult ASAC is, at best, a terrible oversight on the part of Administrator Pistole.

### **TSA's Justifications**

Administrator Pistole's public explanation of the proposed change is unconvincing:

*“A small pocket knife is simply not going to result in the catastrophic failure of an aircraft,” John Pistole, Congressional testimony, March 13, 2013.*

Administrator Pistole cites the armored flight deck door, pilot training and protocols, and the increased vigilance of the flying public as reasons a hijacking could not be undertaken with small knives. Flight attendants and many others in the industry reject this reasoning.

Even prior to the attacks of 9/11, flight deck doors were closed and locked. Today, reinforced doors remain vulnerable. On all flights, the doors are opened for pilots to use the lavatory or coordinate with other crew members, leaving a window of vulnerability.

Today, pilots are trained not to open the flight deck door under any circumstances and to land the plane immediately in the event of an attempted hijacking but this system is any but foolproof. If a pilot were to look out into the cabin and see a family member, possibly a flight attendant-spouse, a colleague, a friend, or a small child being threatened with a blade to the throat, we can reasonably expect human nature to trump training. Additionally, it is not always plausible for a pilot to ground the aircraft, as it may be over a body of water during an incident.

Passenger vigilance has certainly increased in the years since the attacks of 9/11. Passengers have worked with flight crews repeatedly to thwart would-be attackers, bombers, and deranged passengers. We all remember the heroism of passengers on board United Airlines Flight 93 who saved an untold amount of lives by sacrificing their own to disrupt the terrorists' plans. However, as evidenced in the 9/11 Commission Report's account of the events on board Flight 11, the majority of passengers aboard that 767 aircraft were unaware that the situation was any more serious than a routine medical emergency in first class. In a large wide-body plane, particularly with three classes of service, relatively few passengers have a line of sight to the flight deck door during the few seconds when a hijacking may be attempted. Their reaction cannot be relied upon to thwart such an attack. Additionally, on a flight with a predictably low load factor, a team of six or eight terrorists, armed with pocketknives, could easily overpower the few remaining passengers and crew.

*Removing these items allows officers to focus on detecting non-metallic improvised explosive devices, which can blow up an airplane (paraphrased Congressional testimony of Administrator Pistole).*

Flight attendants reject the notion that TSA officers cannot screen for both explosives and weapons. Keeping air travel safe requires both. Allowing certain knives on board will not make security checkpoints more efficient because the new policy does not allow screeners to ignore knives. On the contrary, TSA officers will now be responsible for ensuring that knives meet the required criteria for size and blade locking, potentially slowing down the process even more and providing ample distraction from the task of identifying non-metallic IEDs.

*"We have yet to see a single incident where a passenger was injured using a knitting needle or scissors." ("Small Pocket Knives – More Support Than You Might Think." [www.blog.tsa.gov](http://www.blog.tsa.gov) 18 March 2013)*

Since 2005, certain small scissors and knitting needles have been allowed on board aircraft. In Congressional testimony, Administrator Pistole touted the fact that there have been zero attacks on passengers or crew with those items. Flight attendants and other stakeholders agree with the sentiment expressed by Rep. Eric Swalwell who stated, "That number cannot get better, but it can get worse with this new policy." Despite the lack of reported attacks involving knitting needles and scissors, the threat remains, as the 9/11 terrorists used unconventional weapons, such as box-cutters.

Allowing small knives is a slippery slope. There is no reason to put flight attendants, pilots, and most of all passengers in a position where they may be defending themselves or the entire airplane against armed attackers.

### **Typical Flight Attendant Duties Exacerbated**

According to internal American Airlines reporting, there were nearly 1,200 reported instances of passenger misconduct in 2012 alone. Flight attendants have the unenviable task of addressing and de-escalating myriad in-flight disruptions. During a US Airways flight from Los Angeles to Phoenix in April 2012, an unruly passenger stormed the aisle, attempting to drive the drink cart into a flight attendant, while verbally threatening all those on board. Introducing weapons into situations such as this one makes the job of a flight attendant needlessly difficult and dangerous. In the absence of a Federal Air Marshal, there is no readily accessible official with police powers on board an airplane. Violent, dangerous, possibly deranged or drug-induced passengers are the responsibility of flight attendants. Arming them with even small knives is a grave mistake.

In conclusion, the APFA's top priority is the safety of all passengers. That is why we ask that you, the Members of the Subcommittee, to join us in opposing TSA's dangerous policy change and demand that any future risk-based security policy decisions be made with the direct input of flight attendants.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura R. Glading". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Laura R. Glading  
President, APFA