

The TSA has lost its way

A new policy announced by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Administrator John Pistole on March 4th will allow knives in carry-on baggage with blades under 6 centimeters (2.36 inches) starting April 25th. This shocking announcement was sprung on the public without warning with no vetting, public comment period or input from those representing flight attendants, pilots and passengers-- those actually at risk.

Terrorists will soon be able to board US airliners with knives as sharp as the then permitted box cutters and knives used by the 9/11 hijackers. TSA screeners will also have a whole new set of complicated time consuming inspections for knives that may further slow up airport security.

The 9/11 Commission Report noted that the Al Qaeda hijackers used knives to kill several flight attendants and the pilots on all four hijacked flights, that were then used to kill nearly 3,000 by destroying the World Trade Center and damaging the Pentagon. The FAA in 2001 did not prohibit knives with blades under four inches because a) they did not consider them dangerous, b) some local laws permitted carrying knives, and c) they were hard to detect so banning them could slow down security screening,

Others have suggested that allowing knives will raise the consistently poor performance test scores of screeners and thereby make the TSA look better. The 9/11 hijackers were also reported to have trained killing sheep with pocket knives and were well aware of the lax FAA policies on permitting small knives.

TSA claims international standards required this change, but this is false. The International Civil Aeronautics Organization (ICAO) , the special UN agency which makes aviation security recommendations, has no such requirement, standard or recommendation. ICAO merely indicates that some nations permit knives under 6 cm and others do not, just as some permit gels and liquids and others do not. Some also permit smoking and others do not. No recommendation of ICAO calls for permitting knives in the passenger cabin. Anyone wishing to carry a knife may place it in checked baggage, and the TSA could supply mailers to return confiscated knives to their owners.

On March 14th, TSA Administrator Pistole told Congress "terrorists don't use knives anymore" and his internal studies show that looking for them distracts screeners from looking for bombs. He reaffirmed his new knife policy will be implemented as planned. Really, terrorists must be rejoicing at such revealing comments from the top aviation security official for the United States government. This is one step from "bring it on" and "oh by the way, we are not really ready to stop you."

Given my deep, 24-year involvement in aviation security, I have for months sought a meeting with Administrator Pistole to discuss this and other TSA policy issues. On

December 21, 2012, after the Lockerbie/Pan Am Flight 103 memorial service at Arlington National Cemetery, Administrator Pistole personally gave me his word he would meet with me. I lost my beloved 16-year-old daughter Melina in that 1988 bombing and became an aviation security activist in her memory. Since December 21st, however, four requests to schedule that meeting have been ignored. If the head of TSA ignores his own promises to meet with representatives of those most affected, what chance does the ordinary citizen have for grievances to be addressed?

The TSA now has 10,000 complaints per year, but has no effective system for resolving them. Administrator Pistole has arrogantly ignored numerous meeting requests to meet with stakeholders or provide for any public input prior to announcing the new knife policy on March 4th. While the TSA performs a vital function of keeping terrorists from attacking America using civil aviation, unless it resolves its many problems, perhaps with new leadership, it may not survive in its present form.

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