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Security Expert Urges the U.S. to Reprioritize Its Counter-Terrorism Efforts to Avoid Another Tragedy

2010-01-19

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Terrorist suspect Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to ignite explosives aboard a Northwest Airlines Flight on Christmas day was the latest in a series of recent domestic terrorist plots against the U.S. This near tragic incident has sparked a great deal of debate about why it occurred, who is to blame and what should be done to prevent its repetition.

However, according to global security expert Steve Lee, who has provided commentary to such news organizations as CNN, CNBC and Business Week, the reactions of our leaders to this event for the most part have been "knee jerk" and politically motivated, rather than reflective of genuine concern for the flying public and aviation professionals.

"No blankets on our laps? No visits to the bathroom during the last hour of the flight? If we think this scenario is likely to be repeated, such passive procedures certainly will not prove to be effective," said Steve Lee, Managing Partner of Steve Lee & Associates. Lee noted that check point screening procedures are designed to catch non-terrorist travelers attempting to bring more than 3 ounces of hair product on board an airplane. There are many examples of individuals successfully bringing weapons through security and onto airplanes, so how can anyone really be shocked that explosive material was brought aboard Flight 253? The passengers of Flight 253 are just fortunate that the perpetrator knew almost as little about the explosive and how to detonate it as did the airport security personnel in Amsterdam.

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Overall, Lee feels that the U.S. security agencies have done an excellent job over the last eight years of detecting and interdicting threats long before they get to TSA and international security check points. The security check point is not the place where "the rubber meets the road" in counter-terrorism. But he warns that while TSA and international security standards have improved, protocols and security philosophy do not include behavioral evaluation, situational awareness, or threat recognition consistent with effective counter-terrorism training.

The immediacy of our leaders' reactions is certainly warranted, but the focus is misdirected. The actions or inactions of TSA and its international counterparts at airport security check points around the world are not responsible for this breakdown. Lee isn't convinced that the fault can be laid at the feet of individual intelligence or

law enforcement professionals. Rather, we should be focused on our leadership and examining their policies and practices in the areas of intelligence and inter-agency communication played in allowing this potentially fatal incident to occur.

Most troubling about this event is the apparent breakdown in communications that took place after the suspect's father warned authorities about his son's "radicalization", even though it now appears that the suspect was being tracked by some components of U.S. intelligence. Such intra-agency or inter-agency communication problems are reminiscent of those we faced before the World Trade Center attack on 9/11 - despite the advent of Homeland Security.

Lee feels that poor communication suggests a failure at a policy and leadership level. Our national attention has been focused elsewhere - the financial crisis, the national healthcare debate and now Haiti. Our allies and friends throughout the world tend to follow our lead in security matters. So if we appear to de-prioritize our counter-terrorism efforts, if we appear to adopt a more permeable and accessible posture towards foreign interests and appear overly concerned about the manner in which we identify potential terrorist threats, then our international constituents will follow suit.

Lee concluded in saying, "Without the reprioritization of counter-terrorism and continued emphasis on security - even if that emphasis manifests itself from time-to-time as politically incorrect - I am deeply concerned that we are inviting another terrorist to strap on the explosive device du jour and board an airline bound for one of our American cities."

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