

Armed “sky marshals” and fingerprinting foreign passengers

Bush imposes security crackdown on international travel

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A week after raising the “terror alert” level to Code Orange, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced new requirements that foreign airlines post armed marshals on flights “where necessary,” as determined by US authorities. Underscoring the non-negotiable nature of the demand, Homeland Security secretary Tom Ridge told a news conference on December 29, “Any sovereign government retains the right to revoke the privilege of flying to and from a country or even over their airspace.” He warned that airlines unwilling to comply would be refused landing and over-flight rights for designated flights.

As if to emphasize that Ridge’s threat was not an idle one, US authorities ordered the cancellation and/or long delay of at least a dozen flights beginning on December 24 until after the New Year. One Aeromexico flight to Los Angeles was ordered to turn back in mid-flight in order to rescreen all passengers and luggage. The rescreening produced nothing suspicious, and the flight was allowed to take off again.

British Air flight 223 from Heathrow to Washington, D.C., was cancelled for two successive days and seriously delayed for several others after US spy agencies reportedly picked up electronic “chatter” linking the flight with a terrorist plot. Once one of the delayed flights landed, the plane was directed to a remote area of the airport and passengers were ordered to remain seated for three hours, passports in hand, until a new security check could be completed. Again, no security breaches were discovered.

Three Air France flights from Paris to Los Angeles were canceled, reportedly after lists of passengers turned over to US officials turned up matches with names on US lists of suspected terrorists. One passenger, whose name supposedly matched a Tunisian pilot with possible Al Qaeda links, turned out to be to a five-year-old child. Other cases of mistaken identity involved an elderly Chinese woman, a prominent Egyptian scientist and a Welsh insurance agent.

After contentious negotiations, last month US authorities got agreement from European Union (EU) countries to turn

over the names of passengers on all flights headed for the US before they could land, despite concern that passing on such records violated EU privacy rules. Going one step further, the DHS is now demanding that, upon request, the names be turned over an hour before the flight takes off, even though passenger lists are not normally finalized until minutes before departure.

The Transportation Security Agency has gone so far as to ask the Australian airline Qantas to discourage passengers from gathering in groups during the long flights to the US, except for waiting in line for the airplane bathrooms. Even the Australian government, usually the most sycophantic cheerleader for the Bush administration’s “war on terror,” raised a feeble protest, with Transport Minister John Anderson describing the request as “a little bit hard to handle.”

The placement of armed guards on flights raises serious safety questions, and has generally been opposed by pilots’ unions worldwide. Besides the possibility of shooting an innocent passenger, the most obvious concern is the potential for hijackers to overpower the marshal, thus gaining access to his gun. Another issue is whether bullets could penetrate the airplane’s hull and cause a fatal loss of cabin pressure.

A safety official for the Irish Airline Pilots Association was quoted in the *Irish Examiner* as saying, “We do not accept that it is necessary to introduce armed officials on to aircraft.” He added, “The aircraft should be the last place for security measures. They should have taken place on the ground before takeoff.”

Faced with the loss of the world’s largest travel market, however, most major airlines have acceded to the US demands. German, French and Canadian officials said they had been using armed air marshals for some time. Initially, the British Air Line Pilots’ Association (BALPA) said its members would refuse to fly with armed guards on board, but after meeting with UK transport secretary Alistair

Darling, the union backed down.

A number of smaller countries, whose airlines to date have not encountered specific US requests for sky marshals, and whose airlines run far fewer flights to the US, have publicly refused to go along with US demands. Civil aviation officials in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Portugal said they would cancel any flight that was considered at high risk of a terrorist attack rather than fly with armed guards. South African Airways also said it would not comply. The prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, said that Thai Airways had no need for in-flight marshals “since we always conduct proper checks at our end, and our planes stop at one destination.”

While the US demand for sky marshals and the flight cancellations attracted most of the media attention over the holiday period, on January 5 the Bush administration introduced another measure affecting international air travel with even more ominous implications. Citizens of all but 27 countries are now being required to submit to digital fingerprint scanning and photo taking upon arrival.

In the first day alone, more than 27,000 identity files were created. Three of the people fingerprinted appeared on government “watch lists” of supposed criminals and terrorists, but all three were cleared of suspicion upon further investigation.

By year-end, the program is expected to produce government records on more than 20 million foreigners. Only nations whose citizens are not now required to obtain visas to enter the US are exempt, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore and most European nations. Even these nationals are subject to the new procedure if they plan to stay for more than 90 days, or if they enter on work or student visas.

Another feature of the program, known officially as US Visit, requires visitors to have their fingerprints and travel documents scanned again at automated airport kiosks when they leave. By the end of next year, the same technology and procedures are due to be in place at the country’s 156 land-border crossings.

While long in the works, the new program was rolled out while the nation was still under “Orange Alert.” The Department of Homeland Security reduced the alert level to “Yellow” only a few days later.

The precedent for fingerprinting travelers is being established with non-citizens, but there is no reason to think that Bush’s or some future administration would not also justify wholesale fingerprinting and monitoring of US citizens as necessary to prosecute the “war on terror.”

Eager to show its support for the Bush administration’s latest clampdowns on civil liberties, the erstwhile “liberal” *New York Times* ran a lead editorial on January 7 hailing the

fingerprinting program as “only the first step in the nation’s struggle to keep better track of who arrives and who leaves the country...”

While there are genuine dangers of a future terrorist attack—a threat exacerbated by the war in Iraq, Afghanistan and other US government measures generating popular anger against the US—the White House has never provided a credible explanation for the events of September 11, 2001, and has done everything it can to obstruct any investigation.

This is because the facts show the hijackers entered the country not because of a failure of airport security but because the CIA, FBI and State Department facilitated their entry and continued presence in the US. Several of the September 11 hijackers, including Mohammed Atta, the alleged ringleader, were under direct surveillance by US agencies as suspected terrorists during 2000 and 2001. Yet they were allowed to travel freely into and out of the US and eventually carry out their plans.

The latest US actions—both the requirement that foreign airlines carry armed guards and the fingerprinting of foreign visitors—have further exacerbated international tensions. In a telephone interview cited by the *New York Times*, Michel Ayrat, an air transport director for the European Union, called the US actions “unilateralist and impetuous,” while a spokesperson for the Geneva-based International Air Transport Association, representing 275 airlines worldwide, astutely suggested that the measures were part of a political strategy to keep Americans on edge in order to boost Bush’s reelection chances.

While most governments have acquiesced in the latest bullying tactics of the Bush administration, a judge in Brazil expressed the world’s hostility by ordering that all American visitors to Brazil be fingerprinted and photographed. On a recent visit, US senator Pat Roberts, the Republican head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was subjected to Brazil’s retaliatory procedures.

With the shoe on the other foot, US secretary of state Colin Powell complained that Brazil’s program “discriminated” against Americans, even though the US program targets only citizens of countries not considered reliable enough to waive visa requirements. In defending its actions, a Brazilian Foreign Ministry statement invoked the principle of reciprocity as a “basic element of international relations.”



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