CNN Opinion

Feedback

Is aviation security mostly for show?

By **Bruce Schneier**, Special to CNN
December 29, 2009 7:38 a.m. EST

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Incident on Detroit-bound plane led to tightening of airport security
- Bruce Schneier says politicians react to incidents by imposing "security theater"
- Trying to predict what terrorists will do next is futile, Schneier says
- He says it's better to put resources into investigations

Editor's note: Bruce Schneier is an author and technologist who specializes in security. His books include "Applied Cryptography," "Beyond Fear" and "Schneier on Security" and his other writing can be seen at http://www.schneier.com/

(CNN) -- Last week's attempted terror attack on an airplane heading from Amsterdam to Detroit has given rise to a bunch of familiar questions.

How did the explosives get past security screening? What steps could be taken to avert similar attacks? Why wasn't there an air marshal on the flight? And, predictably, government officials have rushed to institute new safety measures to close holes in the system exposed by the incident.

Reviewing what happened is important, but a lot of the discussion is off-base, a reflection of the fundamentally wrong conception most people have of terrorism and how to combat it.

Terrorism is rare, far rarer than many people think. It's rare because very few people want to commit acts of terrorism, and executing a terrorist plot is much harder than television makes it appear.

The best defenses against terrorism are largely invisible: investigation, intelligence, and emergency response. But even these are less effective at keeping us safe than our social and political policies, both at home and abroad. However, our elected leaders don't think this way: They are far more likely to implement security theater against movie-plot threats.

A "movie-plot threat" is an overly specific attack scenario. Whether it's terrorists with crop dusters, terrorists contaminating the milk supply, or terrorists attacking the Olympics, specific stories affect our emotions more intensely than mere data does.

Stories are what we fear. It's not just hypothetical stories -- terrorists flying planes into buildings, terrorists with explosives strapped to their legs or with bombs in their shoes, and terrorists with guns and bombs waging a co-ordinated attack against a city are even scarier movie-plot threats because they actually happened.

"Security theater" refers to security measures that make people feel more secure without doing anything to actually improve their security. An example: the photo ID checks that have sprung up in office buildings. No one has ever explained why verifying that someone has a photo ID provides any actual security, but it looks like security to have a uniformed guard-for-hire looking at ID cards.

Airport-security examples include the National Guard troops stationed at U.S. airports in the months after 9/11 -- their guns had no bullets. The U.S. color-coded system of threat levels, the pervasive harassment of photographers, and the metal detectors that are increasingly common in hotels and office buildings since the Mumbai terrorist attacks, are additional examples.

NewsPulse

Most popular stories right now

California man among 6 killed in Mexico

Jets booze ban irks New Jersey vodka maker

Man shot breaking into cartoonist's home

Best and worst films of 2009

Report: Deep moon hole could be future colony

Explore the news with NewsPulse »

To be sure, reasonable arguments can be made that some terrorist targets are more attractive than others: airplanes because a small bomb can result in the death of everyone aboard, monuments because of their national significance, national events because of television coverage, and transportation because of the numbers of people who commute daily.

But there are literally millions of potential targets in any large country -- there are 5 million commercial buildings alone in the United States -- and hundreds of potential terrorist tactics. It's impossible to defend every place against everything, and it's impossible to predict which tactic and target terrorists will try next.

Security is both a feeling and a reality. The propensity for security theater comes from the interplay between the public and its leaders.

When people are scared, they need something done that will make them feel safe, even if it doesn't truly make them safer. Politicians naturally want to do something in response to crisis, even if that something doesn't make any sense.

Often, this "something" is directly related to the details of a recent event. We confiscate liquids, screen shoes, and ban box cutters on airplanes. We tell people they can't use an airplane restroom in the last 90 minutes of an international flight. But it's not the target and tactics of the last attack that are important, but the next attack. These measures are only effective if we happen to guess what the next terrorists are planning.

If we spend billions defending our rail systems, and the terrorists bomb a shopping mall instead, we've wasted our money. If we concentrate airport security on screening shoes and confiscating liquids, and the terrorists hide explosives in their brassieres and use solids, we've wasted our money. Terrorists don't care what they blow up and it shouldn't be our goal merely to force the terrorists to make a minor change in their tactics or targets.

Our current response to terrorism is a form of "magical thinking." It relies on the idea that we can somehow make ourselves safer by protecting against what the terrorists happened to do last time.

Unfortunately for politicians, the security measures that work are largely invisible. Such measures include enhancing the intelligence-gathering abilities of the secret services, hiring cultural experts and Arabic translators, building bridges with Islamic communities both nationally and internationally, funding police capabilities -- both investigative arms to prevent terrorist attacks, and emergency communications systems for after attacks occur -- and arresting terrorist plotters without media fanfare.

They do not include expansive new police or spying laws. Our police don't need any new laws to deal with terrorism; rather, they need apolitical funding.

The arrest of the "liquid bombers" in London is an example: They were caught through old-fashioned intelligence and police work. Their choice of target (airplanes) and tactic (liquid explosives) didn't matter; they would have been arrested regardless.

But even as we do all of this we cannot neglect the feeling of security, because it's how we collectively overcome the psychological damage that terrorism causes. It's not security theater we need, it's direct appeals to our feelings. The best way to help people feel secure is by acting secure around them. Instead of reacting to terrorism with fear, we -- and our leaders -- need to react with indomitability, the kind of strength shown by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill during World War II.

The best way to help people feel

By not overreacting, by not responding to movie-plot threats, and by not becoming defensive, we demonstrate the resilience of our society, in our laws, our culture, our

secure is by acting secure around them.

--Bruce Schneier

RELATED TOPICS

Transportation Security
Terrorism
September 11 Attacks

freedoms. There is a difference between indomitability and arrogant "bring 'em on" rhetoric. There's a difference between accepting the inherent risk that comes with a free and open society, and hyping the threats.

We should treat terrorists like common criminals and give them all the benefits of true and open justice -- not merely because it demonstrates our indomitability, but because it makes us all safer.

Once a society starts circumventing its own laws, the risks to its future stability are much greater than terrorism.

Despite fearful rhetoric to the contrary, terrorism is not a transcendent threat. A terrorist attack cannot possibly destroy a country's way of life; it's only our reaction to that attack that can do that kind of damage. The more we undermine our own laws, the more we convert our buildings into fortresses, the more we reduce the freedoms and liberties at the foundation of our societies, the more we're doing the terrorists' job for them.

Today, we can project indomitability by rolling back all the fear-based post-9/11 security measures. Our leaders have lost credibility; getting it back requires a decrease in hyperbole. Ditch the invasive mass surveillance systems and new police state-like powers. Return airport security to pre-9/11 levels. Remove swagger from our foreign policies. Show the world that our legal system is up to the challenge of terrorism. Stop telling people to report all suspicious activity; it does little but make us suspicious of each other, increasing both fear and helplessness.

Counterterrorism is also hard, especially when we're psychologically prone to muck it up. Since 9/11, we've embarked on strategies of defending specific targets against specific tactics, overreacting to every terrorist video, stoking fear, demonizing ethnic groups, and treating the terrorists as if they were legitimate military opponents who could actually destroy a country or a way of life -- all of this plays into the hands of terrorists.

We'd do much better by leveraging the inherent strengths of our modern democracies and the natural advantages we have over the terrorists: our adaptability and survivability, our international network of laws and law enforcement, and the freedoms and liberties that make our society so enviable.

The way we live is open enough to make terrorists rare; we are observant enough to prevent most of the terrorist plots that exist, and indomitable enough to survive the even fewer terrorist plots that actually succeed. We don't need to pretend otherwise.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Bruce Schneier. An earlier version of this essay appeared in New Internationalist magazine.

FOLLOW THIS TOPIC ⊕

We recommend

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claims responsibility
New Detroit scare declared 'nonserious'
Why did security checks fail to spot explosives?

More Opinion

Tackle immigration reform in 2010
A 'lucky to be alive' passenger's story
Don't let security scanners erase our privacy

sound**off** (271 Comments)

Show: Newest | Oldest | Most liked

Subscribe by RSS

Showing 25 of 271 comments

Sort by [Newest first ▾]

✉ Subscribe by email 📶

AntonioPapi

AntonioPapi
One of the best articles Ive read on CNN ever! Congratulations!
25 minutes ago | Like | Report abuse

midniterun

midniterun
The best Security for the traveling public comes from Israel, the Israeli's have their own version of Air Marshals and believe me they don't care who you are everyone goes through a rigorous security screening upon arrival and departing the State of Israel, maybe we need to learn from the Israelis w ...more
6 hours ago | Like | Report abuse

weareall1

weareall1
Well done, Mr Schneier! Many ordinary citizens like myself have been saying the same thing for years. We are dismayed at the apoplectic media response everytime an individual terrorist attempt has been thwarted. We are pained at the spectacle of the once proud American nation morph into a huddling m ...more
7 hours ago | Like (3) | Report abuse

Davidg55

Davidg55
in the year 2001 2973 people died in the september 11 attacks. That same year 42,000 died in car accidents.Which one of these events resulted in trillions being spent, 2 wars, and resulted in us being less safe and less well liked internationally than when we started?p.s. 30k still die every year in ...more
7 hours ago | Like (6) | Report abuse

- *weareall1*

  weareall1
  Let's hear much, much more of this!!
  Perspective, anyone
  6 hours ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

Anto1

Anto1
After flying on 3 flights from overseas and going through security at 3 different airports, when I arrived at Memphis all passangers were forced to pass security prior to leaving the airport! In my opinion it was a little late at that point to check for bombs, etc.
9 hours ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

donbacardi

donbacardi
Oh yes ! Mostly for show indeed. Most of these screener s are there just for the $$$ and are totally clueless...especially in Europe. I recently was boarding a flight from Munich, Germany to Philadelphia, USA and going through the security process. I began taking my shoes off and belt without being ...more
10 hours ago | Like | Report abuse

SpudJDog

SpudJDog
This article states what should have been obvious immediately after 9/11....the TSA is all theatrics, and all it's gotten me is pilfered luggage. After the airlines turn luggage over to TSA care, those lowlifes steal at will, as many of us have learned by now.Further, most of the TSA agents are self ...more
12 hours ago | Like (5) | Report abuse

dnburgess

dnburgess

Hallelujah. Where eas the thinking like this after 9/11 and before the risable war on a noun.

22 hours ago | Like | Report abuse

Guest

Guest

OK here's my security solution. Hospital Gowns! Yep, strip down, put your clothes in a plastic bag, put on a Johnnie and relax. Just don't get up to go to the bathroom, you know those things show a bit much in the back. Just ring the flight Attendant for some peanuts and a bed pan! And you guessed i ...more

1 day ago | Like (4) | Report abuse

Craxer2

Craxer2

Two oblique comments. The 2009 comedy "Up in the Air" has received rave reviews but it may be remembered in the long run for its scenes at airport security, where George Clooney demonstrates the fastest way to clear the gate - slip-on shoes, minimal luggage, etc. And from now on, thousands of travel ...more

1 day ago | Like (2) | Report abuse

Seattle1

Seattle1

Amen to that, BongoBeat. My brother was an airplane mechanic for a major airline until a few years ago and you would not believe some of the stories. And there is a lot of outsourcing going on. You are absolutely right. And it will take quite a few airplanes falling out of the sky for something to b ...more

2 days ago | Like (2) | Report abuse

BongoBeat

BongoBeat

I'm more concerned with the aviation industry cutting corners on maintenance than I am about a terrorist plot or whether my shampoo will explode. That's where the "show" begins, because if travelers were aware, fully aware, of the laxed protocol and who's in bed with whom for the purpose of the bott ...more

2 days ago | Like (15) | Report abuse

Seattle1

Seattle1

I should have added that the airlines failed to follow a basic security rule put in place years ago--question anyone who has no baggage and a one-way ticket--especially someone flying internationally. Oops. And this is a bit off topic, but I feel for the young would-be terrorist's father and family. ...more

2 days ago | Like (5) | Report abuse

- *Davidg55*

  Davidg55

  if often fly 1 way, and 1-way or 2-way usually with minimal luggage. especially since it costs an extra 20 bucks each way for each checked piece.

  Does that mean I am more likely to be a terrorist? (I'm not a terrorist by the way)

  7 hours ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

- *KA9Q*

  KA9Q

  "question anyone who has no baggage and a one-way ticket" What? Why? Are terrorists so cheap they can't buy a suitcase and a two-way ticket, even for what they expect to be their last trip? Give me a break!

  1 day ago | Like (12) | Report abuse

Seattle1

Seattle1

A sensible article. Frankly, I am more worried about people dying from MRSA infections from walking on the filthy dirty floor in the airport in bare feet than dying in a terrorist attack. It seems that common sense has gone out the window. Basic screening, good intelligence (not used in this recent ...more

2 days ago | Like (6) | Report abuse

duthtowner

duthtowner

Its always about putting more money in sucurity.What what needs to be done
is the pooling of information between agency's.This was suppose to be true after 9/11.what the hell happened

2 days ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

ewalters

ewalters

Airplane security is a pop tarts and wonder bread approach. Do we really think that by not showing the plane's path on a video screen or allowing someone to use the restroom or having a blanket in our lap in the last hour of the flight is going to do squat to reduce terrorism? Either Americans are t ...more

2 days ago | Like (6) | Report abuse

xicanodaddi

xicanodaddi

Is there a statistic detailing the number of terrorist attacks actually foiled by airport security? Intelligence/law enforcement are forever whining that their failures are always public but their success never are; let's change that -- let us know each and every attack foiled by airport security.

2 days ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

● **FrankinSD**

FrankinSD

You seem to assume that law enforcement successes are not reported by the media. I don't think that is really true. What is true is that the successes are reported for about 24 hours, while the politically motivated criticisms of even foiled attempts stay in the news cycle day after day.As an exampl ...more

2 days ago | Like (5) | Report abuse

zenbrother

zenbrother

A very interesting perspective, but I disagree with one [rather bold] idea in particular:Quote: "A terrorist attack cannot possibly destroy a country's way of life; it's only our reaction to that attack that can do that kind of damage [...]" The phrase "cannot possibly" makes sense for low-scale atta ...more

2 days ago | Like (4) | Report abuse

elviejo

elviejo

I am forced to confront the deluge of simplistic recommendations and solutions. There is no magician available who can make persons disappear with a finger snap. Israel is the best? How so? It has a caste system which outdoes anything the ancient Hindus imagined; wherein the Western Jews are the Bra ...more

2 days ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

Guest

Guest

The experts tell us that "the community of airport personnel" are trained to spot suspicious people, suspicious actions, suspicious articles, etc. How would Al-Quaeda get around this? By placing people in positions to learn what airport personnel are being taught, then training their people to avoid ...more

2 days ago | Like (2) | Report abuse

PlubiusX

PlubiusX

Mr. Schneier is absolutely correct. The security you can see is primarily for show and to placate the public. Real security is based on intelligence and discreet or covert preventative action. If our security were really in the hands of front line law enforcement or TSA "security", god help us. Just ...more

2 days ago | Like (4) | Report abuse

Load next 25 | View all comments

Post a comment

Log in or sign up to comment

56° HI 68° LO 46°
Costa Mesa, CA Weather forecast

SEARCH
POWERED BY Google

Home | Video | NewsPulse | U.S. | World | Politics | Justice | Entertainment | Tech | Health | Living | Travel | Opinion | iReport | Money | Sports
Tools & Widgets | Podcasts | Blogs | CNN Mobile | My Profile | E-mail Alerts | CNN Radio | CNN Shop | Site map