

**COMBATting BOMBS AND BLADES AT TSA; *Paul C. Light*. Miami Herald. Jan. 8, 2006. Section L
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The Transportation Security Administration made a number of big bets against terrorism when its screeners stopped confiscating small scissors, tools and blades just before Christmas. With airplane cockpit doors virtually impenetrable and pilots now armed, TSA has decided to ignore the small stuff to concentrate on the kind of improvised explosive devices used in last year's Chechnya airplane bombings.

Given only a few seconds to screen each passenger and bag, and operating with a cap on total employment, TSA had no choice but to make the trade off. As TSA's new administrator, Edmund "Kip" Hawley, told the Senate Commerce Committee early in December, the risk analysis of bombs versus blades was not even close.

The new rules are already moving passengers through screening lines faster, and promised protection against a mid-air catastrophe. But the changes do not guarantee absolute safety, and may introduce new risks in airplane cabins and airport terminals.

Blades will remain a danger in the hands of angry passengers, for example.

TSA's big bet here is that flight attendants, hyper-vigilant passengers, and an occasional federal air marshal will suppress the risk. Although pilots are now armed, they cannot be of much help without opening their cockpit doors, which creates the risk of another Sept. 11 attack. And airlines have yet to commit the dollars to train their flight attendants to "de-blade" a passenger.

Bombs will also remain a threat on board, especially if terrorists can figure out a way to bring wires, detonators and explosives on board separately for later assembly. TSA's big bet here is that its 43,000 freshly trained screeners will soon be able to detect the whole or parts of a device as it moves through the checkpoints.

Finally, terrorists will still have opportunities to explode a bomb somewhere between the curb and the checkpoint, or on a thinly guarded airport tarmac. TSA 's biggest bet of all is that its new airport "Viper" teams will detect the risk in time to prevent a suicide bombing at rush hour. Composed of undercover air marshals, local police officers, bomb-sniffing dogs, and transit inspectors, the teams are already operating in selected train stations, ferry terminals and the Washington Metro.

However, none of these bets will pay off unless the agency conquers its recent inertia. Created to seal the airports only months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, TSA has lived an entire bureaucratic lifetime in its three short years.

Once celebrated for going from zero employees to 60,000 in less than a year, TSA soon became just another federal bureaucracy foundering in needless paperwork, silly rules, wasteful spending and passenger anger. Battered by budget cuts, the agency has shrunk by a third, and was forced to cannibalize its research and development budget in 2004 just to meet payroll.

TSA has already taken the first step toward a turnaround by reorganizing its headquarters to focus more on risk. Hawley has moved his regional deputies to Washington to assure greater alertness across the entire agency, and is developing a long list of new measurement tools to make airport security directors and their screeners more accountable.

Changing the agency's management culture is only part of the turnaround, however. TSA must also confront the high turnover, absenteeism and injury rates among its screeners. Highly trained

screeners are useless if they quit for better jobs, play hooky during rush hour, or break their backs lifting super-size bags.

TSA is making yet another bet that turnover and absenteeism will fall with new job classifications that will allow screeners to advance into higher-paying law-enforcement jobs elsewhere in government. TSA is also betting that the new focus on explosives will motivate a workforce grown weary of picking through baggage and searching passengers for cigarette lighters, cuticle scissors and corkscrews.

However, changing "Safety Technicians" into "Security Officers" is unlikely to take the sting out of a compensation system that gives every employee the same once-a-year pay raise regardless of performance. And it will have no impact on injury rates.

TSA must also monitor the unintended consequences of its new procedures, especially the potential for over-reaction in its new "screening-by-observation " behavioral detection program. Only further investigation will tell whether federal air marshals misread the nervousness and desperation of the deranged passenger they shot and killed in Miami in December.

Hawley is well aware of these problems, but will face persistent opposition on his bets from members of Congress, many of whom are lining up behind Rep. Edward Markey's "Leave All Blades Behind Act," albeit with no parallel intent to provide the extra screeners to pursue blades and bombs with equal ferocity.

Moreover, Hawley's bets cannot succeed without more funding from a Congress that has never met a TSA budget cut or hiring freeze it did not like, cash-poor airlines that refuse to invest in training and new baggage-handling technology, and anxious passengers.

If the nation wants TSA to cover bombs and blades equally, it must be willing to pay the price in dollars and self-sacrifice. If not, it must either be willing to stand in screening lines much longer or give Hawley the freedom to focus on the greatest risk.

Paul C. Light is a professor of organizational studies and an expert on public opinion toward preparedness at New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service.

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