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What Happened to Airport Security?

How could anyone have predicted the terrible event that occurred on September 11th? Was it possible that the hijacking of four commercial airliners could have been prevented? It is only after the fact, that we have seriously begun looking into security problems at airports throughout the country. Unfortunately, it sometimes takes a disaster or tragedy for us to realize that changes must be made.

Considering the amount of passengers that safely reach their destination every day, air travel has long been considered the safest and most reliable means of transportation. With the visibility of security checkpoints, X-ray machines, and the absence of recent hijackings, most travelers have also been lead to believe that airport security is adequate. Nothing could be further from the truth. A recent story by CBS's Sixty Minutes paints a much different picture. Steve Elson, who until recently was a special agent for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), tells a frightening story of just how inadequate airport security really is.

Mr. Elson spent three years working with a special team, known as the Red Team, whose job was to penetrate airport security. His findings were much different from the official FAA findings. According to Mr. Elson, the official tests were a joke. The FAA would typically tell the airport personnel when they were coming and what they were looking for. Mr. Elson also cited the poor or improper training of those responsible for

working the checkpoints. Employees are trained to look for objects that the FAA uses in their testing. One such object is an empty bag containing a huge clock and a couple of sticks of dynamite. As he points out current technology is way beyond this old-time bomb. Mr. Elson was able to slip past screening checkpoints 59 out of 60 times using a modern explosive device while working with the Red Team. The one time that he was stopped with the device, he was able to talk his way out of the situation and board the plane (How Secure Are Our Airports?).

It's not difficult to see how Mr. Elson and his team were so successful in breaching airport security considering the employees who work at the first line of defense, the security checkpoint. Hiring of these employees is left up to the airlines, which contracts the work out to the lowest bidder. In most cases the work is performed by poorly trained employees, who are paid around $7 an hour (How Secure Are Our Airports?). Mr. Boelsche, a former manager of Argenbright Security's passenger screening at Dulles airport in Washington D.C. stated that about 90 percent of his workers were not even born in the United States (How Secure Are Our Airports?). This presents a major problem when trying to obtain previous employer information and in doing background checks.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th the FAA have began to rethink their approach to security. They have tightened security in and around airports, and have put into place new stricter guidelines which include: a ban on the sale or use of knives in secure areas of all airports, a ban on cargo or mail on passenger planes, and adding bomb-detection teams (Schouten A8). Most passengers would likely agree that all of these guidelines make sense and should have already been in place long before the events of

September 11th. Perhaps the question is why did it take such a terrible disaster to open the eyes of those in charge of securing our airports, and will the new security measures convince the public it is safe to fly again?

> "It's probably safer now than it's ever been," according to Scott Stephenson, an 18-year veteran with American Airlines, "But it's also more intense than it was before. We're told to let security know if we see the slightest thing that looks suspicious. I'm glad they're doing it, because people are still packing funky things like steak knives in their carry-on bags."(Corliss, 95)

We may never know if the events that occurred in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania could have been avoided. It is too late to point the finger at those who may have been responsible for the security failure. Instead we must learn from our mistakes and fix the problems. This may mean more security measures like those that have already been put into place. We must accept the fact that with the increase in security there will be longer lines and random checks of passengers and their luggage. We have long been willing to sacrifice safety for speed and convenience, perhaps now we will decide to reverse that trend.