

America's Time Bomb

The 44th president will inherit a number of serious domestic crises, but few as potentially devastating as our unresolved answer to airport security

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As George W. Bush leaves office this January, America's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, remains, at best, unresolved. Military action in Afghanistan continues, as does our ancillary action in Iraq, with no end in sight. The mastermind behind the crime that killed more than 3,000 Americans, Osama bin Laden, remains at large. The Freedom Tower, designed to replace the World Trade Center, is mired in financial and legislative red tape.

While each of these ongoing embarrassments continues to cost the United States power, prestige, and financial security, none of them threatens the safety of the country as significantly as this simple fact: Our nation's airport-security apparatus still suffers from the same weaknesses it did before the Twin Towers were toppled. For this special investigation, *Best Life* interviewed a wide range of security experts, airline industry analysts, and current and former officials at the Transportation Security Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration. They all agree on one thing: We're no safer than we were before 9/11.

Since that catastrophic morning, we've seen the narrowly thwarted attempt of shoe bomber Richard Reid in 2001; the female Chechen suicide bombers who successfully brought down two Russian





AIRPORT INSECURITY
Former FAA inspector Steve Elson snuck weapons (bombs, guns, knives) past screeners more than 90 percent of the time.

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evaded electronic detection. A lead bag, for example, appears on the monitor as a dark, indistinguishable blob. But at JFK, screeners have been instructed, in the interest of time, to clear every bag that doesn't alarm...regardless of what's on the monitor. “We are so busy,” says Wendy, “that if an item doesn't alarm, we have to let it through.” Indeed, JFK screeners were so overwhelmed during our visit that nobody was even watching the monitors. “In the beginning, we started off with six people on each machine,” she says. “But now we are down to three, so there's no time to sit and monitor the screen.”

According to an internal TSA e-mail, dated June 6, 2003, shortages like these throughout the nation's airports have long been known about. It was written less than a month after Congress capped the number of full-time screeners at 45,000, which resulted

in at least 6,000 TSO layoffs. “Each day we screen [fewer] bags,” wrote Scott McHugh, then the federal security director at Washington-Dulles airport, to his counterpart at Harrisburg International Airport in Pennsylvania. “Consequently, we are now screening only 57 percent of all bags with electronic screening. Up to now, we have been able to hide this fact from the public (and any terrorist surveillance teams)...” If you're wondering how the other bags get through, they're cleared with a method called batch swiping. A TSO swabs a cart full of checked bags in a few places and tests for explosive residues. The day after McHugh sent the e-mail, his counterpart at Boston's Logan Airport forwarded it to several colleagues with a note attached: “McHugh says it like it is and never receives a response from [TSA] HQ other than to chide him for being too progressive.”

Soon after the e-mail went public, McHugh, a former international security director for Philip Morris, resigned.

4 | Training for TSA Screeners Is Getting Worse

Inadequate training is a common complaint among the more than a dozen TSOs interviewed at JFK and other airports. In the first years under the TSA, screeners say they were given between 40 and 100 hours of training, some of it on the job and the remainder through interactive training modules on a computer. But TSOs aren't paid for time spent studying, and the materials are considered SSI—security sensitive information—and can't leave a secure area in the airport, so screeners have to travel to the airport on their own time, at their own expense, in order to study. They seldom do. Meanwhile, new TSOs receive less training than experienced ones do, and most of it occurs on the job, where overwhelmed veterans now have to worry about training rookies while looking for weapons and explosives. “We have people running around the terminal who are not being trained and not being monitored, and nobody seems to care,” says one TSO supervisor at JFK.

“You teach people all this security sensitive information, give them security clearance, and then three weeks later, they quit,” adds Sara, another TSO at Terminal 4 who didn't want her real name used. “I have to fly somewhere next week, and I'm scared to get on a plane.”

5 | Sensitive Areas Are Not Secure

At JFK, a TSO colleague of Wendy's and Sara's, whom we'll call Mark, demonstrates for us a handful of security concerns in public areas of the airport. At several JFK terminals, for example, screened bags have to be wheeled manually on a cart outside the secure checked-baggage area to reach the airplane, where they are accessible to people who haven't undergone security screening. It's an issue that's common at many of the nation's older airports, which don't have inline baggage systems. Mark also points out that no one is guarding the door to the ramp adjacent to the baggage-return carousels. Directly on the other side of this door, dozens of aircraft are waiting to refuel and load before departing for their next destinations. The ramp door is clearly visible from the street and is accessible to anyone walking into the arrivals area. As Mark, Wendy, and Sara look on, an airport employee

swipes his card, opens the door, and holds it as one, two, three, four other employees walk through. “That’s called piggybacking,” says Mark. “It’s supposed to be a \$10,000 fine for every offense, but no one is watching the ramp doors.” He explains that all the TSOs are needed upstairs at the checkpoint; there aren’t enough to station any downstairs. “Look, they are holding the door for that guy with the big box,” says Wendy. “That thing could be full of explosives. No one is even checking.” It turns out that while the TSA has taken over responsibility for checkpoint security and baggage screening, security throughout the rest of the facility remains in the hands of the airlines and

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the airport owners...just as it did prior to 9/11.

Up until this point, the majority of problems reported here are things that are right out in the open, things that all travelers, airline executives, and politicians can see but have somehow collectively chosen to ignore. This enrages Steve Elson, a 63-year-old retired FAA special agent and former leader of the FAA’s Red Team, the small, elite, clandestine unit that was responsible for discovering and correcting security weaknesses before 9/11. It was once his job to smuggle through airport security the bombs and weapons we hear about in those GAO reports. He exposed the vulnerability of U.S. aviation security by successfully sneaking past screeners with potentially deadly items (e.g., bombs, knives, and guns) 90 to 100 percent of the time, but his findings received little attention from Congress or the airlines. Elson became so fed up with the lack of attention paid to security issues that, in 1999, he quit the agency. Two years later, on the morning of September 11, he was dismayed to discover his predictions had come true. “There is no goddamn way in hell those...in Congress don’t know the abysmal and inexcusable state of affairs in TSA and AVSEC [aviation security],” says Elson. “But when something happens, they will be up there in front of the media feigning ignorance, demanding accountability, and wanting more hearings and investigations.” The only difference is that today, the danger is obvious, and the American public is complicit in the self-deception—to a point. The remaining items on this list are problems even the most attentive traveler may not realize.

6 | No After-Hours Security

“We’re so off the mark as far as real security,” says a high-level TSA official in her fifties who is responsible for making sure the TSOs and the airlines follow all the agency’s security guidelines at one the busiest airports in the Northeast. “We are much more vulnerable than we were before 9/11. I am an inspector. I am there every day.” She mentions, for example, the susceptibility of aircraft parked on the ramp. “I was doing a test to see how easy it would be to get on an aircraft after hours,” she says. “I found ramp doors open, aircraft doors open. A lot of the time, the airlines didn’t even close the doors to the aircraft overnight.

If I could easily get something onto an aircraft, so could a terrorist.”

This official also discovered another security lapse: The FAA requires that all aircraft be searched during off-duty hours for planted items that can later be used in a terrorist attack. Several airlines at her airport employ the low-wage janitors who clean the aircraft every night to inspect the planes. “A low-paid employee from some cleaning company can get up in the middle of the night, swipe his card, and go into any area of the airport he wants,” she says. In November of last year, 23 illegal immigrants were arrested at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport for using fake security badges.

7 | No Accountability

Security infractions such as those listed above are punishable by fines and other penalties—but these are rarely enforced. “All the carriers are given a rule book,” says the high-level TSA official. “But TSA headquarters won’t enforce it. If you go against anything, raise questions, not only are you not encouraged or just ignored, but you are also blacklisted,” she says. Apparently, the problem is endemic. In the course of this investigation, *Best Life* repeatedly reached out to Democratic Texas Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection, who is responsible for TSA oversight. Her press secretary first said she’d be available for comment, but after we sent the findings of this investigation, she retracted her offer.

8 | Institutional TSA Cover-ups

Last fall, an investigation by the Department of Homeland Security uncovered evidence

that the TSA gave its screeners advanced warning that undercover inspectors would be coming through checkpoints to test the effectiveness of security procedures. On April 28, 2006, the TSA sent a message on its system-wide communication system, NETHUB, to alert 650 airport-security officials of a “possible security test.” The chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, Democratic Mississippi Congressman Bennie G. Thompson, requested a Department of Homeland Security inquiry after TSA denials. “Our government cannot play on our fears of an attack and then try to cheat its way through its midterm exams,” said Thompson at the hearing to discuss the attempted cover-up.

9 | Endemic Obfuscation

When TSA chief Kip Hawley was asked to explain the allegations of a cover-up, he proclaimed his support for covert testing and said he believed it was working. When pressed about the high failure rates of TSA screeners, Hawley explained that even if screeners fail to detect bomb components or weapons, there are still “multiple layers” of security in place to apprehend terrorists. It is a mantra the TSA repeats whenever their security flaws are exposed publicly. “Every failure has been greeted from the TSA with the comment, ‘We’re proud of what we’re doing,’” says Michael Boyd, president of the Boyd Group, consultants to the aviation industry. “Doctoring tests by warning screeners before the tests are implemented...that’s corruption. But not one TSA official has been fired. Not one.” The real problem, says Boyd, is that Congress doesn’t hold the TSA accountable. “While C-SPAN cameras were rolling, boy, that was tough questioning,” he says, referring to Thompson’s hearing. “But the minute the camera went off, they were slapping each other on the back.”

10 | The Airline Lobby Exerts Enormous Control Over the TSA and FAA

“Right from the start, it was apparent that the TSA was going to be even worse than the FAA had been,” says Bob Monetti, who was on the TSA’s Aviation Security Advisory Committee when the agency was established. Monetti has a long history with the U.S. aviation-security apparatus. After losing his son in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, he became a vocal advocate for improving aviation security measures, eventually becoming a consultant for the FAA. After 9/11, he testified before

the House Transportation Committee that the government had known for years about significant weaknesses in aviation security. “September 11 wasn’t a surprise,” says Monetti. “I didn’t have much security clearance, I didn’t have access to the information they did, and I could see it coming.” He adds that any real reforms the TSA—and before them, the FAA—attempted to implement were thwarted by the airlines. “To solve these issues will cost airlines money, and the occasional plane won’t be able to take off on time. That’s unacceptable to airlines. They ran the FAA, and now they run the TSA.”

A look at campaign contributions from the airlines to key individuals in Congress supports Monetti’s assessment. In 2002, when many airlines had declared bankruptcy, the industry contributed large sums of money to congressional candidates. These contributions seemingly paid off as Congress continued passing laws that relieved airlines of liability from future acts of terrorism. “When Congress passed the bill making the airlines not responsible, and the security companies too, for their horrible lack of behavior and their lack of security, we lost any chance of accountability,” says Mary Schiavo, a former inspector general for the Department of Transportation. “We are in a very dangerous situation now because if nobody is responsible, the job won’t get done.”

During testimony last fall before a House Homeland Security subcommittee, Hawley acknowledged that the top security threat faced today by U.S. aviation is from terrorists bringing onto an aircraft a bomb made from components readily available in a grocery or hardware store. Hawley’s justification for the high failure rates was that the investigators had “moved from testing of completely assembled bombs...to the small component parts.” The real issue, he explained, was not with TSA security, which was doing the best it could do, but with the tests being too difficult. Screeners were looking for the bombs they had seen in the script. *Now they were supposed to improvise.*

More than seven years after the September 11 attacks, it’s time for America to get serious about a response. And while it will take time, effort, and creativity to rebuild Ground Zero and capture bin Laden, our first national priority isn’t repairing the damage from the nation’s most devastating attack. It’s ensuring that the same thing doesn’t happen again. ■