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Backgrounder

The History of US Airport Security

Based on empirical evidence, airport security is typically improved after an incident draws attention to weaknesses in current procedures. Terror attacks and other illegal activity force airports to reevaluate their protocols. Continual improvement is necessary to ensure public safety and to deter future threats.

In September 1970, a skyjacking drew political attention to commercial flights. After the incident, President Nixon enacted the use of sky marshals, in-flight personnel to protect passengers.

Another skyjacking occurred in 1971. A passenger by the name of D.B. Cooper threatened to blow up the plane unless he was paid \$200,000. After collecting money from the crew and passengers, Cooper lowered the rear steps of the plane and parachuted to safety. Following the incident, airlines adapted a new safety feature that makes it impossible to lower the rear steps while a plane is in flight.

More changes occurred in 1972 because of the growing popularity of commercial air travel. The increased number of passengers made it difficult to maintain safety standards with just air marshals. In response to the need for greater protection, airports began pre-flight security screenings such as metal detectors for passengers and their carry-on luggage.

In 1988, an onboard bomb killed 270 passengers and crewmembers. The owner of the bag containing the bomb was not on the plane. The incident prompted a new policy that all bags must be in the possession of a person on the flight.

The terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, resulted in a variety of security enhancements such as increased inspection of carry-on luggage, a detailed list of prohibited and allowable items, and thorough checking of individuals. According to the Heritage Foundation, \$2.5 billion has been spent on baggage screening equipment since 2004. Sept. 11 also resulted in the creation of the Aviation and Transportation Act and the Transportation Security Administration. In addition, there is an increased police presence outside airports, passenger lists are reviewed against government watch lists, and airports have taken on more air marshals.

Despite increased security measures, several terror attempts have occurred since Sept. 11. For instance, in December 2001, an airline passenger attempted to hide a bomb in his shoe. Now passengers are required to remove their shoes during pre-flight screenings. On Dec. 25, 2009, a man attempted to set off a bomb that he had smuggled onboard in his underwear. In October 2010, a terror plot was interrupted when officials discovered explosive packages onboard a U.S. flight.

Airports have since begun using full body scanners during pre-flight screening. The new technology allows security personnel to check for items hidden underneath clothing. According to Time Magazine, 68 U.S. airports currently have full body scanners. Individuals who refuse to walk through the scanners must agree to a mandatory full body pat-down. The pat-down includes inspection of intimate areas such as chest and genitals.