



I'M NOT A SECURITY OFFICIAL...I JUST PLAY ONE ON TV

By Lawrence A. Husick, Esq.

In August 2003, an electric grid failure led to a widespread blackout in the Northeastern US. Within minutes of the event, Federal officials from both the White House and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) were issuing statements assuring the public that the power failure was not related to a terrorist action. More than six months later, however, investigators were still not completely sure of the causes, and only later issued a report tracing the blackout to a sagging power line in Ohio (and a cascading series of failures stemming from that line.)

At the time, we posed the rhetorical question about our government officials, “How did they know?”¹ How, within minutes of the incident, could anyone have ruled out terrorist action as a cause, especially in light of the then-common knowledge that foreign computers were constantly probing our power grid infrastructure, which was vulnerable to cyber-attack, and that conventional and very low-tech attacks on power grids had been widely published in both the mainstream media and in specialty outlets such as *Paladin Press*?

Fast forward to Christmas Day, 2009. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s attempt at bombing Northwest Flight 253 failed. Whether, as many have speculated, it was due to lack of training, or as my colleagues Stephen Gale and Greg Montanaro have suggested, it was intentional misinformation, DHS sprang into action, as Secretary Janet Napolitano announced on December 27, 2009, “Now once this incident occurred, everything went according to clockwork.” Again, it seems, we have been jolted from our slumber by a “wake up call.”² Once again, we predict, the US will roll over, hit the snooze button, and return to business as usual.

Secretary Napolitano clearly had a very difficult job to do. Faced with the need to reassure a nervous traveling public during one of the busiest holiday periods of the year, with hundreds of political opponents in the Congress, media and blogosphere drooling at the chance to attack, and with an unwillingness to divulge intelligence information, sources or methods to al Qaeda, she had her work cut out for her. But what work is that, exactly? What should be the role of the Secretary of Homeland Security, and of the government in general? Is our confusion and the resulting dissatisfaction in the aftermath of Abdulmutallab’s attack on Flight 253 merely a result of our continuing failure to clearly address the nature of terrorism and to clearly define our responses to it?

According to the DHS web site, the, “Department of Homeland Security’s overriding and urgent mission is to lead the unified national effort to secure the country and preserve our freedoms.”³ Even so, that same site intones that the “Department ... will continue striving to protect our homeland while ensuring the strength of our economy.” Just how much of DHS’ activity is directed to security, and how much to the economy is unclear. What is clear is that this dual mission leads to erosion of effectiveness in both aspects, leaving the US both less safe and less well-off.

Having recently traveled from Philadelphia to Tampa by air, I was subjected to a 45 minute security line video barrage, presented on large flat-screen televisions by earnest actors dressed in TSA blues, that assured me that removing my shoes, carrying 3 oz. bottles in a clear one-quart bag, and not commenting in any way on the process was necessary to my safety. Never mind that more travelers will be killed and injured on their way to and from the airport, or that many more will suffer from food-borne and air-borne pathogens during travel – those far-greater risks are not the concern of DHS. As many have pointed out, our ability to properly gauge risk is flawed, and as a result, we behave in quite irrational ways.

In 2010, the US will spend \$55,115,227,000 on DHS alone. The Budget-in-Brief document is 162 pages long.⁴ The

¹ <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20030818.homeland.galehusick.blackout.html>

² As of January 12, 2010, the search “flight 253” “wake up call” yields over 22,000 articles on Google!

³ <http://www.dhs.gov/xabout/strategicplan/> retrieved 12-JAN-10.

⁴ http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget_bib_fy2010.pdf retrieved 12-JAN-10.

Transportation Security Administration employs 52,000, screens over 625 million air passengers per year, and has reduced the average airport screening wait time to less than 20 minutes. Because of security concerns, passengers are now advised to arrive at least two hours early for domestic flights. (Computed at the Federal minimum wage, the cost to the economy of these security-induced delays now exceeds \$7 billion per year.) Recall the words of Osama bin Laden in November 2002, “This economic hemorrhaging continues until today, but requires more blows. And the youth should try to find the joints of the American economy and hit the enemy in these joints, with God’s permission.” Regardless of the outcome, Mr. Abdulmutallab’s “failed” attack certainly fulfills al Qaeda’s goal of continuing the attack on the joints of the economy.

What, then, are the policy implications of requiring DHS (and the President) not only to provide security, but also to reassure us after every incident? Why do we continue to demand that our officials engage in “security kabuki” and the TSA in “security theater” simply to get the public to fly on commercial airliners? Why did the White House and the press pillory Vice-President Biden when he expressed his personal view that he would advise his own family not to fly during the height of the Mexican H1N1 flu pandemic?⁵

It is time that the US step back from its irrationally overblown fear of terrorism. While it is certainly true that al Qaeda and other groups, both Islamist and not, bear us ill will and wish to attack us and our allies, we have allowed both our politics and our policies to be distorted, and have, unwittingly or not, helped our enemies. We must insist that a rational evaluation of risk and response be a part of our policy process. In the past, we have suggested a “Security Impact Assessment” as one method of such analysis.⁶ This is not to suggest that we scrap everything done in the name of homeland security since September 11, 2001. Rather, we recommend that the twin criteria of effectiveness and efficiency be assessed in light of the actual risks, and that only those processes that can be justified on that basis be retained or enhanced. While some may argue that this assessment presently determines DHS priorities, much of the public sees it differently, and the present assessment process is certainly far from transparent.

As one example, we continue to remove shoes (at some, but not all airports) based on the singular example of Richard Reid, the “shoe bomber.” Perhaps for this reason, Mr. Abdulmutallab used his undershorts to hide his explosives. If the editorial cartoons have it right, we will now have to place our undergarments in a ubiquitous gray plastic bin. The same may be true of most liquids. In the alternative, we may spend another trillion-or-so dollars on scanners that undress us, just like those \$10 X-Ray Specs that used to be advertized in the back of “Popular Mechanics”. While technology may hold some of the answers to our security concerns, the increasing use of “behavior detection officers” by DHS seems to be potentially more effective and efficient, based on the experience of Israel’s El Al Airline over more than thirty years.

As much as it may be useful to reassure the public that government is “on the job,” it may ultimately be better to just do the job properly, and leave the attempt at glossy public relations efforts to others. After all, the track record shows that our officials are not particularly effective when they attempt to respond to every threat in the role of Reassurer-in-Chief.

Lawrence Husick is a Senior Fellow in FPRI’s Center on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, where he concentrates on the study of terrorist tactics and counterterrorism strategies, with a particular focus on technology leverage as a defining characteristic of the modern terrorist. He is also co-director of the FPRI Wachman Center’s Program on Teaching the History of Innovation.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org

⁵ “I would tell members of my family - and I have - I wouldn't go anywhere in confined places now. It's not that it's going to Mexico – it's that you're in a confined aircraft. When one person sneezes, it goes all the way through the aircraft.” – Vice President Joe Biden, NBC Today Show, April 30, 2009.

⁶ <http://www.fpri.org/fpriwire/1101.200302.galehusick.madtomud.html> retrieved 12-Jan-10.