Secure Flight Program Creates Safer Skies

Jena Baker McNeill

On March 31, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced the implementation of Secure Flight—a program to screen flight passenger data and flag possible terrorists before they board a commercial airplane. DHS should be commended for implementing such a smart security measure. Secure Flight expands America's capacity to find possible terrorists while minimizing the impact on the airline industry and protecting the rights and privacy of individuals. DHS and Congress should use this program as a model for future airline security efforts and take steps to ensure its full implementation.

Checking Passengers. Prior to 9/11, the individual airlines screened passengers for security risks. This system was known as the Computer Assisted Prescreening Passenger System (CAPPS). CAPPS, however, was limited: The only datasets that could be screened for security risks were the passenger's form of payment and travel itinerary.

After all of the 9/11 hijackers boarded airplanes under the CAPPS system, the need for a new approach was clear. In fact, the 9/11 Commission Report emphasized that the aviation industry lacked adequate means to screen all commercial flight passengers against known or suspected terrorists watch lists. After a contentious debate over the best way to use this passenger data while protecting civil liberties, the idea for Secure Flight was developed.

Secure Flight checks a passenger's data against a federal database of the FBI Terrorist Screening Center—a center that integrates all available information on known or suspected terrorists into a central repository. While alternative proposals considered prior to Secure Flight would have tasked the airline industry with this screening process, under this program the airlines' only charge is to gather basic information (full name, date of birth, and gender) when the passenger makes a reservation.

Why Secure Flight Works. Implementation of Secure Flight is a positive step toward addressing a glaring security gap left open since 9/11. It produces the following benefits:

- *Keeps Americans safer.* Secure Flight ensures that known or suspected terrorists are prevented from boarding commercial airplanes in the U.S. And since the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is performing the screening, passenger data can be compared against a classified list rather than the unclassified list that is now shared with airlines—making certain that the right people are prohibited from boarding.

- *Minimizes impact on industry.* Because TSA performs the screening itself, the airline industry does not have to make costly upgrades or major changes that might harm an already struggling industry. Prior to Secure Flight, an alternative plan, known as CAPPS2, would have cost the airline industry over $1 billion in logistical

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upgrades. Secure Flight will be significantly cheaper—it is estimated to cost approximately $630 million—and has already received far more favorable reviews from the airlines themselves.

- *Maintains privacy and civil liberties.* Under Secure Flight, TSA—not outside entities—will check watch lists. This means that information privacy is maximized by decreasing the possibility that private data will wind up in the wrong hands. Furthermore, Secure Flight helps tackle some of the civil rights concerns associated with watch lists by minimizing misidentification. On many occasions, under the current system, those who have a name similar to someone on the watch list have been prohibited from boarding an airplane. This misidentification is minimized when airlines, during the ticket purchasing process, obtain the traveler's gender and date of birth. Furthermore, if an individual is wrongfully prohibited from boarding an airplane, he can use the DHS's Traveler's Redress Inquiry Program to address the error.

Going Forward. Going forward, DHS and Congress should continue to implement Secure Flight and work together to expand other programs that increase airline security while shedding those that do not. These steps include:

- *Ensure full implementation of Secure Flight.* TSA has now implemented Secure Flight with four volunteer aircraft carriers. DHS says that they are going to add more carriers in the next few months, with 100 percent implementation on both domestic and international flights by 2010. Congress should fully fund this program and DHS should ensure 100 percent implementation.

- *Expand the Visa Waiver Program.* The Visa Waiver Program—which allows passengers from member countries to travel to the U.S. without the need for a visa—increases air travel security by acquiring information about foreign travelers before they even reach U.S. soil. Furthermore, the information sharing and security agreements that go along with visa waiver membership help the U.S. and its member countries to fight terrorism around the globe—all while expanding the U.S. economy and improving America's image abroad.

- *Scrap the 100 percent air cargo mandate.* The 100 percent air cargo screening mandate is an example of the wrong kind of policies for the airline industry. This mandate would require 100 percent screening of cargo transported by passenger aircraft. TSA is not likely to meet the three-year deadline given for implementation—the mandate requires enormous structural changes. Furthermore, there is nothing to indicate that this program would produce any security gains. But every indication suggests that this mandate will have a tremendous impact on the supply chain by hindering efforts to move goods around the United States. Congress should reassess the need for such a policy.

The Right Kind of Security Policies. Implementing the right kinds of aviation security policies will ensure that Americans can travel freely and safely with the knowledge that their privacy and civil liberties are being maintained. DHS deserves kudos for designing a program—Secure Flight—that achieves these goals.

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