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After Detroit: Presidential To-Do List for Plugging Gaps in Stopping Terrorist Travel

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The problem in stopping terrorist travel to the U.S. is not airport screening per se. Trying to turn every airport into another Maginot Line or Fort Knox is going to fail sooner or later. Instead, the best way to stop terrorist plots is to frustrate them before they get started—thwarting the 2006 London-based conspiracy to smuggle liquid explosives on U.S.-bound international flights is a good example of just how effective such a preemptive strategy can be.

Until the terrorists are rooted out, however, the free nations under threat from global terrorism have to do a better job at thwarting terrorist travel. Would-be murderers like Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (the Detroit-bound Christmas bomber) should not be allowed near an airliner. At the very least, such suspicious travelers should never be able move freely without greater scrutiny, inspection, and surveillance than the average airline passenger. Adopting some long-overdue common-sense initiatives—ones that have been frustrated by interagency and international cooperation squabbles—could help close security gaps. In order to enact such a sensible security agenda, however, more leadership from the White House is needed.

A Six Step Program. Here is short “to do” list of measures on which the Administration could take immediate action:

Step 1: Improve Visa Security Coordination Between the Departments of State and Homeland Security. Serious questions have been raised over

why Abdulmutallab’s visa was not revoked or why there was not additional follow-up and interaction with the National Counterterrorism Center—measures that might have placed him on a “no-fly” list.

By law, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is supposed to set security policies for the State Department Consular Affairs offices that issue visas. That has never happened because of squabbling between the two departments. Likewise, embassies have been reluctant to accept visa security officers from Homeland Security who could work with the consular officers in identifying security gaps and threats. Presently, only the U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia is required by law to have visa security officers present.

At the very least, other “high-risk” traveler countries should be required to have them as well. The White House should press both departments to put these programs back on the fast track.

Step 2: Put More Air Marshals in the Skies and in Airports. Air marshals provide another layer of deterrence against terrorism. In addition, giving these marshals real-time access to databases (both while they are on the ground and in the air) will offer an additional capacity to screen flight mani-

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fects for suspicious passengers. An alert air marshal might have flagged Abdulmutallab for more scrutiny or spotted malicious behavior before the would-be bomber tried to bring down the plane.

Currently, armed U.S. air marshals cover only a fraction of international flights bound for the states, and few other countries have air marshal programs. The U.S. force should be expanded, and the White House should press allies to establish or expand their programs.

Step 3: Move the “Secure Flight” Program Faster. Secure Flight is a program that would flag suspicious passengers for additional screening on domestic flights. Although Abdulmutallab’s flight originated from overseas, the 9/11 hijackers all left from U.S. airports.

The U.S. could certainly see that the type of attack tried by Abdulmutallab originate from a small rural airport in the United States. Secure Flight might flag such a passenger for additional screening. Bombs like the one carried by Abdulmutallab would likely be found in a “pat-down” in secondary screening. Therefore, the White House should work with Congress, the private sector, and DHS to speed up deployment of Secure Flight.

Step 4: Step Up the Implementation of Real ID. The Real ID program sets standards for U.S. driver’s licenses. Again, if a Detroit-style attack were tried domestically, Real ID-compliant licenses would help keep malicious actors attempting to use fraudulent, stolen, or altered licenses from breezing through security check points.

As the 9/11 Commission pointed out, improving the surety of licenses must be a high priority. Yet many states are far from ready to implement Real ID. Rather than trying to alter or gut the program, the White House should work with federal agencies and the states to implement Real ID as quickly as practical.

Step 5: Expand the Visa Waiver Program. It might sound like exempting more countries from the requirements that their citizens must have a visa to fly to the U.S. would increase the risk of terrorism—but that assumption is wrong.

States that participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) actually have to agree to a more robust

level of information sharing on travelers than states from which America requires visas. Nigeria, for example, (where Abdulmutallab hailed from) is not a VWP country. So, for example, Nigeria does not have to supply the U.S. authorities with Passenger Name Records (PNR), which provides the itinerary and other important identifying information. In contrast, data obtained under the VWP (including PNR data) makes it much easier to identify potential malicious travelers and prevent them from coming to the United States. At the same time, the Consular Affairs resources from these countries that do not pose a threat (like Poland) can be shifted to countries of greater concern, like Nigeria (which would not qualify for VWP).

The White House needs to press Congress to give it the additional authorities necessary to appropriately expand the VWP to friendly nations that pose little threat and are willing to cooperate with the U.S. in making international travel safer and more efficient and improve the enforcement of immigration laws.

Step 6: End the 100 Percent Visa Interview Requirement. By law, everyone applying for a visa has to have an interview. That actually makes Americans less safe.

Consular office resources are stretched thin by being forced to interview everyone rather than focusing on “high-risk” travelers. Abdulmutallab might never have gotten a visa if the interviewer had spent more time with him.

The White House should work with the Congress to repeal the 100 percent interview mandate and instead replace it with a “risk-based” system to direct interviews toward the individuals most likely to be malicious actors or violate U.S. immigration laws.

Thwarting Terrorist Travel. None of these steps are silver bullets. None of them will gain the White House great accolades from politicians or pundits. All, however, would make material contributions to thwarting terrorist travel. All of them would make more effective use of the resources at America’s disposal. None of them would require spending billions of dollars on more airport security. None of them would impinge on the freedoms or liberties of

the average traveler. All of them would make the skies safer.

If the White House needs some problems to “fix,” these would make a good start. The Administration should get started.

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