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Posted on Tue, Jul. 23, 2002

Yes, it's a potent weapon

BY TIMOTHY WHEELER

Congress is finally getting serious about airline security. In a nearly 3-to-1 vote last week, the House passed the Arming Pilots Against Terrorism Act, which would allow qualified commercial airline pilots to use firearms in the cockpit to repel a terrorist threat.

The scenario addressed by the bill is grim but simple. If terrorists make it past ground security measures, overcome the cabin crew and breach the fortified door to the flight deck, the pilot or copilot would be able to stop them.

Aside from the fact that congressional members are frequent fliers acquainted with the weaknesses of airline security, why was the House vote so one-sided? One senses that the nation sees the need for a new level of security based on a rational risk assessment, rather than emotion.

The bill has built-in protections against the most obvious pitfalls. The type of firearm allowed in the cockpit would be specified, as would the type of ammunition. And the bill calls for an analysis of the risks to the aircraft's systems posed by an accidental discharge of an on-board firearm.

As serious as the prospect of a cockpit gunfight is, there is precedent in law-enforcement training for similar scenarios. Hostage-rescue training is one example. Shoot-don't shoot drills, close-quarters combat and weapon retention are core competencies for many specialties of law enforcement. They would likely be part of the pilots' training.

Training would be set to the standards of air marshals and would be tightly controlled. Participating pilots would have to requalify often with their firearms.

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Many airline pilots have military experience and firearm training. The House bill recognizes that advantage and gives them preference in the trainee-selection process.

The opposition of the gun-control lobby was predictable, and it repeats much of the same old hand-wringing. A Violence Policy Center spokesperson worried that a dropped handgun might fire, or that a terrorist may take away the pilot's gun. These mishaps are unlikely, and practically irrelevant considering the gravity of the threat.

What is less understandable is the resistance of the Bush administration to arming pilots. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta and the Transportation Security Administration's John McGaw both oppose the idea, preferring to beef up ground security and to increase the number of air marshals. Unfortunately, they have nothing else to offer between these half-measures and an Air Force fighter shooting down a hijacked airliner.

Until now, a zero-tolerance mind-set toward weapons on airliners has shaped both government and corporate airline policy. Like similar strategies for "weapons" in schools (e.g. kids pointing their fingers as make-believe guns), this policy has been driven by fear.

But a parallel development over the last 15 years has proven that a zero-tolerance policy toward carrying guns is not only ineffective, it can cause more deaths and injuries. Laws allowing responsible, qualified people to carry self-defense firearms have proven the same benefits over and over again: Gun mishaps among carry-license holders are rare and violent crime goes down. This lesson has diminished opposition to self-defense firearm carry laws.

Similarly, the public seems ready to accept armed pilots as one more layer of security in the vulnerable environment of a passenger jet. We are beginning to understand that armed and qualified good guys provide the most potent weapon available against the threat of deadly force. This is just as true at 30,000 feet as it is on the ground.

Timothy Wheeler is director of Doctors for Responsible Gun Ownership, a project of The Claremont Institute.

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