



**WMRC Article**

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**CONTENTS**

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New Fears of Airborne  
Terrorism as Foreign Flights  
into the US are Cancelled  
and Delayed

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## Global: New Fears of Airborne Terrorism as Foreign Flights into the US are Cancelled and Delayed

Only a few days after the US government issued new rules requiring that certain inbound commercial aircraft from foreign nations carry air marshals, nearly a dozen flights from a variety of countries were cancelled or delayed amid fears of possible terrorist attacks against the US.

<b>WMRC Perspective</b>	
<b>Significance</b>	Despite the dramatic measures that have been taken by most developed countries - and especially the US - to protect commercial air travel since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, more commercial flights are being cancelled and delayed as a result of ongoing terrorist threats.
<b>Implications</b>	Increased security measures to protect the air transport system have cost the industry and the general economy billions of dollars, caused passenger and cargo delays, and raised overall travel and shipping costs, but the system is still subject to terrorist attack, which will have broader economic implications.
<b>Outlook</b>	The US government will develop agreements with governments and foreign airlines in an attempt to ensure the safety of inbound flights into the US, but commercial and cargo flights originating from outside the US will be cancelled or delayed on a more frequent basis as terrorist threats persist and intensify.

### Al-Qaida 'Flies the Friendly Skies'

Since the US Department of Homeland Security raised the US terror alert level from yellow ('elevated') to orange ('high') on 21 December last year, nearly a dozen commercial flights inbound to the US from foreign locations have been cancelled, several were delayed, and three flights were escorted to their US destination by US fighter jets. The US terror alert status was increased following US intelligence reports that al-Qaida was planning an attack to 'rival 11 September' in scope some time during the holiday season. The warning of a commercial airliner-borne attack on the US came a week later when US intelligence agencies cited 'specific, credible' information that terror groups were planning to use US-bound flights from abroad to carry out attacks similar to those perpetrated on 11 September 2001, when four planes were hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and a field in Pennsylvania in what is believed to have been a thwarted attack on the White House.

The fear of US authorities is that the aircraft will be hijacked by legitimate passport holders in countries 'friendly' to the US and crashed into populated areas or into nuclear power facilities on the east coast of the US or into oil refineries in Alaska. US intelligence officials were reportedly alerted of a potential attack using foreign airliners and when the passenger manifests of a number of flights were cross-referenced with law enforcement databases of suspected terrorists, there were several matches, which prompted the US warnings and subsequently cancelled flights. And US flights are not the only ones that are possible targets - British Airways cancelled two of its flights from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, a few days earlier.

US-Bound Flights			
Airline	Cancelled	Delayed	Escorted
<b>Air France</b>	6	2	2
<b>British Airways</b>	2	1	0
<b>AeroMexico</b>	2	2	1

### If You Shoot, Don't Miss

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, when flight-trained terrorists hijacked the aircraft and turned them into deadly weapons, the US government dramatically increased its air marshal programme in order to give law enforcement an in-flight ability to thwart another similar attack. Marshals are specially trained and armed and travel under cover. They are given special weapons that will allow them to take down a would-be terrorist without fear of penetrating the bulkhead of the aircraft, which would prove disastrous. Further steps to prevent hijackings include installation of steel-reinforced cockpit doors and a proposal to train pilots in shooting to kill in the event of an

attempt to commandeer the aircraft. As a last resort, should all of these systems fail, the US military is on a heightened state of alert at airbases around the country and is prepared to destroy any commercial airplane should an attempt be made to use it to crash into populated areas, critical infrastructure such as oil refineries, or other sites that would bring disaster, such as nuclear power facilities.

Now the US is attempting to force other countries to implement similar measures to ensure the security of commercial and cargo aircraft entering the US from abroad. According to US officials, the fear is that because the methods for securing the US air transport system have proven effective, terrorists will attempt to commandeer aircraft from abroad, bound for US cities, because security is not as tight in other nations. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that the US government would prevent certain flights from abroad from landing at their intended destination in the US unless there are air marshals on the aircraft. However, roughly half of the countries that have officially responded to the new US edict have said that they will not comply, claiming that the issue of security should be addressed on the ground through adequate passenger and baggage screening and that putting guns on aeroplanes would do more harm than good.

The International Air Transport Association - a trade association representing the interests of 275 airlines - opposes having guns on aircraft, but would settle for informing the pilot that an air marshal is on board. Pilots' unions around the globe are also expressing their displeasure at the notion that they themselves would be armed and expected to directly intervene should it be necessary. Overall, the US directive will have to be subject to definition on a case-by-case basis in order to be effective without being overly cumbersome.

### Tall-Order Security Measures Falling Short

After the September 2001 attacks, the US government undertook the most significant reorganisation of the federal government in nearly 100 years. The administration of President George W Bush created the Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration, spending billions of dollars on new technologies, personnel and systems. According to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), 1,600 flights have been escorted or intercepted since those attacks, and the pilots flying the military jets are trained to shoot down commercial aircraft if necessary. However, the threats to air security can only be alleviated if such measures are applied beyond US borders to passenger and cargo aircraft and ships bound for the US.

US Call for Air Marshals on Inbound Flights	
Yes to Air Marshals	No to Air Marshals
Australia	Denmark
Canada	Finland
France	Mexico
Germany	New Zealand
Philippines	Norway
Poland	Portugal
Russia	South Africa
Singapore	Sweden
United Kingdom	Thailand

Some 122 million people entered and left the US in Fiscal Year 2002 through 115 airports, 14 seaports and 50 major land crossings, and the security measures tracking travellers are making a leap into the digital age. Starting on 5 January, non-US citizens who have visas will have their passport entered electronically, and digital fingerprints and photographs will be taken and stored in a database for future reference. However, this will only track suspected terrorists that are already known to US authorities. As is the case with the current fears over foreign-bound airliners to the US, it is believed that unknown terrorists with legitimate passports from friendly countries are attempting to, at the very least, enter the US undetected.

### Multiple Threats Require Varied Response

As the devastating terror attacks proved to the world, a commercial aircraft is highly vulnerable to terrorism and in multiple ways. The nature of air travel these days is to travel internationally, which means that security in Country A may take necessary steps to protect travel within that country, but is vulnerable to air travel from Country B that does not have stringent security measures. Without a global standard for air travel, the system will only be as safe as the most insecure place. Therefore, a global standard for airline security is required:

- **Threat:** Terrorists gain access to airport grounds to plant a bomb in a commercial aircraft.  
**Response:** Reinforce airport perimeter security with fencing, cameras, lighting and patrols.
- **Threat:** Terrorists gain access to an aircraft as passengers in order to take control of the plane by force.  
**Response:** Cross-reference passenger manifests with terrorist databases.  
**Fail safe 1:** Reinforce cockpit doors to prevent unwanted entry.  
**Fail safe 2:** Air marshals to intervene with an armed response against would-be hijackers.  
**Fail safe 3:** Arm pilots with low-calibre guns to defend the aircraft if necessary.
- **Threat:** Terrorists plant a bomb in the baggage hold.

- **Response:** Screen all checked baggage and cargo for explosive devices.
- **Threat:** Terrorists use air-to-air missiles to shoot down commercial aircraft
- **Response:** Closer monitoring of wider areas surrounding airport flight paths.
- **Fail safe:** Retrofit commercial planes with counter-measures similar to those on military aircraft.

## Outlook and Implications

The US government is once again using its considerable political and economic weight to force other countries to meet a standard that is more to their liking, and many countries are pushing back under the assumption that if they stay unified, they can convince the US to relax their stated level of restrictions. However, on this subject, the US is more likely to speak loudly and carry a small stick, meaning that it will admonish countries that do not provide air marshals on their US-bound flights, while allowing it to occur when intelligence does not point to a specific threat. One of the critical goals of the air marshal strategy is to serve as a deterrent to a potential hijacker. If a hijacker armed only with a sharp object is considering taking over a plane, he will not know for sure if an air marshal with a gun is on the plane and prepared to shoot, since the marshals travel under cover.

The frustration of the US is warranted in this case since all of the security measures the government has undertaken will not be nearly as effective if their measures stop at the border. Such a big country with so many planes, ships and trucks coming and going on a daily basis presents a daunting security challenge that can only be overcome with common international standards and a high level of co-operation. Without a more uniform minimum standard, the opportunity for terrorists to carry out a devastating attack on a well-defended nation such as the US will be relatively unabated.

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