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A Forgotten Post-9/11 Hoax **by James Bovard**

In the wake of the hijacking and crashing of four airliners and the subsequent shutdown of the nation's airports on 9/11, many Americans were hesitant to return to fly the friendly skies. Speaking on September 27, 2001, at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, President Bush decried the "atmosphere of fear" created by the terrorist attack. He declared that "one of the great goals of this nation's war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry, to tell the traveling public, get onboard." He proudly announced, "Tomorrow, nine Cabinet members will board U.S. airlines to fly around the country to do their jobs." The secretaries' courage aimed to rally all Americans and prove that there was no need for Americans to "live in fear," Bush said.

Only five Cabinet secretaries made it to the airport and up and away the next day. Labor Secretary Elaine Chao flew to Louisville, Kentucky, on the morning of September 28. She declared,

I am flying today to encourage all Americans to get back to work, to visit family, to resume our way of life. We need to all do our part in getting America back to work, and defeating terrorism. Each person who steps onto a plane is sending a message to the world that we will not live in fear.

Arriving in Louisville, she told reporters that there was no additional security on her flight that morning.

Commerce Secretary Don Evans bragged that morning on CBS's *Early Show*,

I'm also traveling commercial, as you know, sending another signal to Americans all across this country that it's safe to fly.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Mel Martinez arrived at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and announced,

I'm traveling without bodyguards, just like anyone else would travel.... America is back; flying is safe.

A few days later, news leaked out that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had placed armed undercover federal air marshals on each of the Cabinet secretaries' flights. FAA security director Michael Canavan, a former army lieutenant general, was fired after he balked at placing marshals on the politicians' flights, since he believed other flights that day were at higher risk of being hijacked. (He was overruled.)

The heroic Cabinet secretaries' hoax received little or no mention in the vast majority of the American media. There were too many other confidence-building news events to cover in those exciting times. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta justified the ruse:

In the case of the Cabinet members flying on commercial airlines, those flights had been previously announced by the president and were highly publicized, potentially raising the threat for every passenger on each of those flights.... Clearly, if air marshals were added to those flights this action would have been taken to ensure the safety of all of the passengers.

Except for the passengers on other flights that the FAA security director had concluded were at greater risk.

Mineta never explained why the Bush administration deceived the public by claiming that the Cabinet secretaries were flying without additional protection.

Federal negligence and 9/11

Bush's public praise and endorsements of the Transportation Department would have swayed fewer Americans if the public had known more about how FAA bureaucratic negligence contributed to 9/11.

On the morning of September 12, airlines received a fax from the FAA with a list of 300 people classified as dangerous by federal agencies and who were henceforth prohibited from boarding any flight. Steven Brill, in his book *After: How America Confronted the September 12 Era*, noted that the FAA had not previously bothered compiling and forwarding to airlines lists of "flight risks" it received from the FBI, CIA, and its own experts. Brill learned from FAA and Justice Department officials that

two of the [9/11] hijackers were on those September 10 lists — something that Ashcroft would later say he could not confirm or deny. In fact, says the FAA official, his agency had crossed those names off on September 12 to avoid embarrassment.

The FAA official explained: “We just never got around to setting up a protocol for who would control the list and how we would get the airlines to implement it.” Brill noted that “this failure of the FAA to circulate that no-fly list ... seems clearly to have resulted in, or contributed to, at least two of the hijackings.”

From the start, the Bush administration seemed far more concerned with restoring public confidence than with making air travel secure. Two days after the attack, President Bush practically announced that the problem of airline safety had been solved, telling reporters,

We have taken every precaution to make sure that it is safe to fly in America. There are beefed up security at our airports. There is increased presence on the airplanes.

But the old crew in Washington was left completely in charge.

It took less than a week for Washington politicians to transform the FAA’s greatest debacle into its finest hour. Secretary Mineta announced on September 16,

Let me take this opportunity to thank all of the employees of the Federal Aviation Administration under the great leadership of Jane Garvey and Monty Belger for the heroic work that they have done in response to this national crisis. And everyone from the screeners at the airports to the pilots to cabin crews, the additional law enforcement personnel, everyone is working at a high level of dedication and teamwork, and all I would like to say to everyone is, Thanks a million.

Yet the FAA had been repeatedly warned by its own agents and inspector general that the federally mandated security system was full of holes and completely unreliable. A former Transportation Department inspector general, Mary Schiavo, observed that FAA officials “absolutely don’t like this job function. They don’t want to do security. They’re very, very poor at it.” She noted,

What we have done over the past is pay ticket taxes and facility charges that went into the aviation trust fund which was supposed to be for aviation safety and security but we use it for things like the nice concourses and the airport and the stores.

FAA chief Jane Garvey commented a few days after the attack,

I don’t think any system that we put in place, any system that we’ve had in place, has contemplated people’s willingness to commit suicide.

Yet hundreds of suicide bombing attacks had occurred worldwide, stretching back to Beirut in the early 1980s.

Less than three months before the hijackings, an FAA advisory committee decided to upgrade the training manuals and official guidance for responding to hijacking attempts. FAA official Mike Morse said the new

scenario will be one involving a team of hijackers with a higher degree of sophistication and training. And that scenario will more replicate what we've faced in some of the international hijackings abroad in recent years.

Morse told the advisory committee, "We hope to have some new training materials out in the fall" of 2001 to replace the preemptive surrender approach FAA urged in response to hijacking attempts. But the hijackers moved faster than the bureaucrats.

Bureaucratic heroism

With each passing week, the actions of bureaucrats on 9/11 became more heroic. In an appearance before the National Press Club on October 17, 2001, Garvey even asserted that the immediate grounding of aircraft on 9/11 "thwarted" other hijackings:

I think the acts that the controllers took, the calmness with which they approached the landing of all the aircraft, the calmness and professionalism of the pilots as well, I think really did avert some other potential tragedies that day.

Garvey never offered any evidence that other hijackings were prevented. Former FAA security chief Billie Vincent noted that Garvey's own "security service has been giving strident warnings of a possible terrorist attack on U.S. aviation for the past two to three years."

Bush and Mineta sought to reassure the public by placing National Guard troops in airports. However, some states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, prohibited the guardsmen from carrying loaded weapons in airports. A spokesman for Gov. Mark Schweiker of Pennsylvania justified posting guards with unloaded guns in airports saying it "reassured the traveling public during an uneasy time." In most airports, the guards did little more than take up space and consume oxygen. At San Francisco International Airport, a Guardsman shot himself in the behind while he was extracting his pistol from his holster.

On October 30, Mineta, responding to reports of continued airport-security flaws, publicly conceded that

an unacceptable number of deficiencies continue to occur. And the result is a growing lack of confidence and increasing criticism of the actions that are being taken by the Federal Aviation Administration. And I want to reverse that trend.

There was nothing more perilous than criticizing the FAA. Mineta declared,

Every time the system is not followed it breaks down the confidence of the traveling public, and it reduces the confidence they have in the federal government.

For an old politician like Mineta, maintaining faith in government is the ultimate public service. (The Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport and the Mineta Transportation Research Institute, established by act of Congress in 1991, are testament to Mineta's clout from his long tenure in Congress.)

The early frauds after 9/11 were quickly forgotten as the media and most Americans rallied around the government and Bush. However, if people had not been so gullible early on, Bush would have had far more difficulty railroading the USA PATRIOT Act through Congress. And if so many Americans had not kowtowed and believed whatever the government proclaimed, it would have been far more difficult for Bush to drag the nation into an unnecessary war in Iraq.

James Bovard is author of [The Bush Betrayal](#) as well as [Lost Rights](#) (1994) and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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