

## **A New Danger: The Proposed Introduction of Lethal Weapons In Our Nation's Air System**

By Christopher Hollis

Since September 11, a new urgency has evolved. People have realized that they are not as safe as they once thought. This realization has prompted much debate. Of the many proposals, one is most alarming. With the proposal of arming pilots with hand guns, would such an action add a layer of protection, or introduce a deadly new danger into the nation's air system that the adoption of a stun gun would nearly eliminate.

On February 17, 2002, the US government took over airport screening in the nation's airports. The goal of this step was to find items that are or could be used as a weapon. In late December of 2001, "authorities said a Florida man who was arrested with a loaded 9-millimeter semiautomatic pistol in his carry-on luggage had boarded two flights" in Tampa and Atlanta "before the gun was found" (New York Times 1B3). Slips in security such as this have led to the decision to put baggage screening in the hands of the government. One goal of screening luggage is to prevent a hand gun from getting on a flight. So why do 67,000 pilots, represented by the Air Line Pilots Association, want hand guns on planes?

President Bush indicated "that he thinks there are better options to increase flight security than arming pilots" (Wald and Bumiller B7). Perhaps, rightfully so, having a hand gun on a plane is dangerous; if a mistake were made in the attempt at disabling or killing a hijacker, an innocent passenger could be severely injured or killed. In an interview with retired Captain Bob Hollis of the former Trans World Airlines, he said that "hand guns have special ammunition that would not penetrate the fuselage, but there is always the possibility that a bullet could hit someone else" (Hollis Interview). Although the bullet would not depressurize the cabin, a passenger could in the worst case be killed. Consequently, allowing a deadly weapon on a plane is adding just another element of risk to our nation's air system.

If a decision was made to allow hand guns as a line of defense to be used on planes, who would they be issued to? Pilots are not trained to use hand guns. The cost associated and the training time required to arm pilots with hand guns would be far too great for the airlines to bear in their current financial condition. The extensive background checks required and other factors would make the proposal nearly impossible to implement. Pilots are not as trained as Sky Marshals, whose job is to take out terrorists. Pilots would have to be trained not only to shoot, but know how to shoot with accuracy. Would it not be better to have a person whose sole purpose is to know how to deal with terrorist situations, rather than a pilot whose main purpose is to fly a plane, be the one to protect the public?

The problem is that Sky Marshals, who are trained to use a hand gun, cannot be put on every flight due to the amount of Sky Marshals that would be required. But even if Sky Marshals could be used, a hand gun would not just help Sky

Marshals in the case of terrorist situations. If a hijacker was able to gain possession of a hand gun on a plane, it would give them a lethal weapon that they would not have had if there were no hand guns onboard the plane. What possible proposal would increase air security without putting passengers at a high degree of risk?

Federal aviation officials have received "more than 30,000 ideas such as" what would answer this question "for applying technology to airport and airline security" (Watson D1). Ideas included retinal scans, video cameras in the cockpit, stronger doors, and full body scans. One idea in particular is the proposal to arm pilots with stun guns. Taser International, a company that makes a popular stun called the Taser, has already proved that its stun guns work. The Taser stun gun has been "used by more than 900 law enforcement and corrections agencies in the USA, Europe, and Canada" (Adams FRI 2). With so much field testing, the stun gun is a reasonable alternative. The combined cost associated with training, security, and the purchase of the devices would be less than that of a hand gun.

The best reason to choose a stun gun over a hand gun is that a stun gun has not proven to be lethal. If a passenger were shot, that person would be injured by the charge, but should recover. Incapacitating a person is also easier, since a pilot could hit the person anywhere and get the same immobilizing effect. There are other ways of dealing with terrorists, like the reinforcement of a cockpit door and the use of the crash ax as a weapon. As for the best type of gun to use, the stun gun is a much safer alternative for use in an aircraft. With a near zero chance of injuring a passenger, a pilot may be more inclined to take out a hijacker with a stun gun rather than with a hand gun that could cause the death of a passenger onboard.

Since the stun gun is much safer than a hand gun, the stun gun is the most viable weapon to use on a flight. The training of pilots is easier and less expensive due to the large cost of making sure a pilot is well trained and that he or she could shoot with a good deal of accuracy. Passengers would be at nearly no risk of injury, while a gun onboard the plane could cause the loss of innocent lives. If a hand gun was onboard, it would always be possible that a hijacker could gain the possession of that hand gun, a deadly weapon, whereas a stun gun could only be used as a weapon that causes injury, not death. This reason alone is a good enough reason to kill any proposal that would put a deadly weapon, like a hand gun, on planes.

## Sources

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