Passengers Remain a Plane’s Last Line of Defense Against Hijackers

By Kingsley Browne
Special to The Detroit News

It has become a truism that everything changed with the terrorist attack on Sept. 11. Nonetheless, some things have remained constant, and one of them is the fact that we, as individuals, are the ultimate guarantors of our own safety.

Americans see evidence of that proposition in the heroic actions of the passengers on Flight 93, who overpowered terrorist hijackers intent on using the airplane as a flying bomb against some unknown target in Washington. We would no doubt have seen similar behavior on the other hijacked planes had those passengers been fully aware of the hijackers’ intent.

These events primarily tell us that, in future airline safety, passengers must be the last line of defense on the airplane. We can deprive potential hijackers of weapons of even modest efficacy, such as disposable razors and plastic dinner knives, but in the hands of a trained killer a sharp pencil or a sturdy shoelace will do as well. With even less training in combat skills than the hijackers received in flight instruction, a person can become an effective killer with his bare hands. Thus no amount of baggage screening will keep all potential killers off of airplanes.

The goal then must be to have an effective response if an attempted hijacking occurs. We should all now assume that anyone who hijacks a plane intends to crash it into an important target.

This is a reasonable assumption, since potential conventional hijackers, who would demand either political concessions or monetary payment, probably now perceive the odds against them as too great. Unlike before, they must now consider not only increased airport security but the substantial likelihood that their plane will be shot down to prevent it from reaching its presumed target.

In the past, hijacked passengers and crew were well-advised to remain calm and accede to the hijackers’ demands, since most hijackings caused little loss of life. This is no longer true. Once passengers and crew understand that they will all be killed if hijackers complete their plan, compliance no longer makes sense.

In almost all cases, hijackers will be substantially outnumbered by passengers and crew. In most cases, passengers engaging in concerted resistance to the hijackers should be able to
thwart their plans. In some cases, they may save their own lives in the process; in others, they may lose their lives in a noble cause, as did the passengers on Flight 93. Once potential hijackers understand that their odds of success have dramatically diminished, the gamble that they make with their lives may no longer be attractive.

The spot that one supposedly buys in paradise through a suicidal attack on an important national symbol may be in a much higher-rent neighborhood than the place one earns by crashing a plane into a cornfield. Those who would bankroll such hijackings may lose their willingness to train kamikaze pilots when the best they can hope for is that their stooges will hit the ground.

It is time for a nationwide public-education campaign advising citizens that they should physically resist hijackers. Not every individual on a plane will be suited either temperamentally or physically to engage in such resistance. But if enough are perceived as willing to do so, hijacking will become too high risk an endeavor. The cost of a series of public-service announcements urging forcible resistance is trifling compared with the benefit it may yield. An ethic of passenger resistance, coupled with other security measures, would substantially increase airline safety.

Some may believe untrained citizens should not be urged to take the law into their own hands, but it is their lives, not the law, that they are safeguarding, in the same way as citizens who lock their houses and maintain firearms for home defense. The government cannot have armed agents everywhere, nor would we want it to. We must understand that a society whose members give up their willingness to fight for themselves is at the mercy of those who would use force for evil ends.

Kingsley Browne is a professor of law at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Copyright 2001 The Detroit News.