

WebMemo



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London Terror Plot Foiled: Lessons for Congress

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British authorities arrested or are seeking almost two dozen suspected terrorists in conjunction with a plot to bomb simultaneously multiple transatlantic flights to U.S. cities. There are lessons to be learned from thwarting these attacks. There is little in what we know so far to argue for doing anything other than sticking to the strategy we have for fighting and winning the long war. There are, however, congressional initiatives that can make the American way of fighting the war on terror better.

The Facts

Here is what we know:

- This was a serious terror-ring—professional, well-organized, and determined, intent on reaping disaster on the scale of 9/11.
- The good guys were not caught unaware. U.S. and British agencies had been investigating this plot for months. The White House knew of the plan. U.S., British, and other foreign agencies shared information and connected the dots.
- The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) had prepared for and understood the intended means of attack—using explosives smuggled on board disguised as harmless liquids. It had contingency measures in place and rapidly adopted security procedures to deter future attacks.
- At this point, the likelihood of a terrorist attack is pretty low. The terrorists know that they have been exposed.

What Congress Can Do

There are responsible measures Congress can take right now. They include:

- *Resist the temptation to throw money at the problem.* After every major terrorist incident, there are voices in Congress that want to go on a spending binge, regardless of whether more spending will actually make us safer. Some have already called for speeding up the effort for 100 percent inspection of cargo on commercial aircraft. That proposal makes no sense. Stuffing bombs in the cargo bay is an unlikely scenario, and the means available to detect such devices are not very effective. Security solutions that overly focus on screening all cargo make for a losing strategy.
- *Give the administration the tools it needs to fight terror.* The investigation and arrests demonstrated that the U.S. needs tools like the Patriot Act and the National Security Agency's intercept programs and that these measures can be applied without undermining civil liberties. Providing additional authorities, such as those proposed in the Terrorism Surveillance Act of 2006, is a good way to strengthen the tools we already have.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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- *Restructure TSA.* While TSA responded well to this incident, it is still saddled with unrealistic congressional mandates and chronic funding problems. Revising the agency's mission and turning over airport screening to the private sector would allow TSA to focus more on its real task of keeping bad people and bad things off airplanes.

A Good Day in the Long War

There is only good news in the way the U.S. government responded to this threat. The response

demonstrated that America and its allies take the threat of transnational terrorism seriously and have developed the means to combat effectively those intent on slaughtering the innocent. Congress can now step in and help make good weapons in the war on terror better.

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