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## Detect bombs, not scissors

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The uproar over the government's announcement that it would no longer search for and confiscate passengers' 4-inch scissors and screwdrivers demonstrates how our society is still struggling to define the concept of "security" in the post-9/11 world.

The logic of the proposal is straightforward. Now that cockpit doors have been sealed, air marshals fly on many flights, pilots are armed and passengers are likely to revolt against an in-flight hijacking, the risk of terrorists taking over a plane with small weapons and crashing it into a building has been substantially reduced. Relieving airport screeners of the responsibility to search for these small potential weapons, which account for 25 percent of the 12.6 million items confiscated, will allow them to focus on more dangerous threats such as hidden explosives.

From the flurry of criticism that has ensued, one would have thought the government had decided to allow serial killers to sign on as baggage screeners. Four members of the U.S. House and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton introduced the "Leave All Blades Behind Act" to reverse the new policy. Another legislator fumed that the "TSA" of Transportation Security Administration should not stand for "Take your Scissors Aboard." The leader of the flight attendants union fretted that the scissors would be permitted into "our workplace without any justification."

This reaction results from the misconception that we can secure ourselves against all possible risk from terrorism. Memo to America: We can't, and the sooner we understand that, the safer we will be.

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In no other area but homeland security do we make the assumption, or, worse yet, the demand, that the government secure us against all possible forms of risk. If we wanted to reduce auto fatalities to close to zero, we could do so by driving tanks. But we don't. Likewise, we do not set air quality or food safety standards so high as to preclude all possibilities of sickness or disease -- to do so would be impracticable and far too expensive.

By getting into our cars every day, eating processed foods and playing sports, for example, we all accept a level of risk that something bad can happen. We need to start incorporating this concept into our thinking about security policy.

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The delusion that we can protect against every type of terrorist threat can actually make us more vulnerable. Policy-makers attempting to respond to public anxiety and bolster their credentials as being "tough" on terrorism will direct resources toward the most high-profile threats, such as aviation security, even when a rational risk analysis would call for a far different allocation of scarce resources.

For example, the homeland security appropriations bill signed by President Bush in October allocates 97 percent of the available transportation security funding to aviation, even though the recent major al-Qaeda attacks in Europe have been against trains and buses and, historically, mass transportation has been a more frequent target than aviation.

Similarly, this summer, following bombings in London, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff was chastised by members of Congress when he suggested that the government should give greater priority to preventing catastrophic attacks that might kill thousands of people instead of worrying about a subway bombing that might kill dozens.

But he was right. It makes no sense to pour a disproportionate amount of resources into defending against low-consequence threats when we have virtually no way of detecting a nuclear weapon being smuggled into the United States in a cargo container and minimal defenses against a range of naturally occurring or terrorist-introduced biologic pathogens.

Four years after 9/11, it is time for our public figures to help educate the public that our homeland security efforts are not being designed to eliminate risk, but rather to minimize and manage risk. Once the public starts accepting the risk of a terrorist attack as one of the many background risks that we face in our everyday lives, the government will be able to shape public policies that maximize our protection.

Until then, we may be stuck with policies that require airline screeners to spend their time searching for children's scissors deep in a carry-on bag while the man with the belt of plastic explosives slips right on by -- unnoticed.

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