

BAGGAGE QUESTIONS UNANSWERED CHECK-IN MANTRA WORKED, SOME SAY

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Two of the most famous questions in contemporary American society have been relegated to the history books: "Has anyone unknown to you asked you to carry an item on this flight? Have any of the items you are traveling with been out of your immediate control since the time you packed them?"

When the government stopped requiring ticket agents to ask air passengers these rote questions last week, most travelers, airline industry insiders, and editorial writers heralded the move as an overdue bow to common sense.

But were the questions really so silly? They do make lines stretch longer. They do seem unlikely to goad a terrorist into confessing. They won't catch a liar if the interrogator doesn't even make eye contact - or if the interrogator is a computer screen at electronic check-in.

Yet not everyone in the world of aviation is so sanguine about the abrupt reversal of a policy that has been around for approximately 15 years, a reversal that some say may signal the resurgence of a deadly American cultural trait - overconfidence - not even a full year after Sept. 11.

"I'm a little sad to see them go," said Arnold Barnett, an MIT professor who studies air safety. "The questions may have made us all warier. And we'll never know about the bombing attempts that went unmade because of that."

"The Two Questions," as government officials call them, became mandatory amid a climate of serious terrorist threats. A major factor was the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Another was a bombing equally chilling but not as well remembered today - because it never happened. On April 17, 1986, an Irish hotel maid named Anne Marie Murphy checked in at London's Heathrow Airport on her way to Tel Aviv. Murphy, five months pregnant, was supposed to meet her Jordanian fiancé's family in Israel before their wedding. The father of her unborn child, who had insisted on packing her bag, parted with a kiss on each cheek.

Security guards at El Al, the Israeli national carrier, searched Murphy's luggage and revealed a bomb powerful enough to kill the 375 people scheduled to board the 747, including more than 200 Americans.

Murphy's fiancé, Nezar Hindawi, is serving a 45-year prison sentence for the bombing plot, in which Syrian intelligence officials were implicated.

El Al's passenger interrogations are famously intensive, posing and reposing questions about the luggage - along with countless other topics.

"I've gotten some questions in Israel that were tougher than grad school exams," said Barnett.

But it's not just the answers that matter. It is how the passenger answers, whether there's any sign of hesitation or dishonesty. The US government's "Two Questions," modeled on El Al, were supposed to be sensitive to body language, too.

It seemed that no one ever taught that to the ticket counter workers, said Bert Ammerman of River Vale, N.J., who lost his brother Tom on Pan Am Flight 103. Over the years, Ammerman was often disappointed during airport check-ins to see that agents didn't even look up from their desks to make eye contact as they asked the two questions.

Of course, even some patriotic citizens who had little to hide found themselves lying during the two-question interrogation.

As flawed as the strategy is, some analysts say it may have had a positive impact on security. Barnett pointed out that the constant repetition over the years did drill it into travelers' heads that they should never agree to a stranger's request to take some goodies to his Aunt Betsy in Atlanta. It's similar to the repetition of airplane safety lessons, like the one about how you're supposed to put your own oxygen mask on before you help your child. Even if you ignore those safety lessons after the fifth or 500th trip, the messages still sink in.

How does anyone know that the questions didn't deter other would-be bombers from using a stranger, relative, or, like Hindawi, a lover as a dupe? Phillip A. Karber, chairman of the International Air Terminal at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, thinks it probably did.

"There's a social science phenomenon that when something works we tend to forget why years. Karber was ambivalent about the policy reversal, saying a good idea may have devolved into an irritant over the years.

In announcing the dropping of the questions, Transportation Security Administration head James M. Loy argued the questions "lost whatever original value they contributed and now can be safely eliminated."

Since Sept. 11, security improvements have done the job of those two questions, and done it better, said TSA spokesman Robert Johnson.

The annoyance factor was part of the decision, too. Loy is trying to mollify some critics who say that post-Sept. 11 security goes too far. He ended the policy of forcing travelers to drink from beverages they

bring through X-ray machines after news broke of a woman at JFK made to drink from a bottle of her own breast milk.

"We want safe and secure skies," said Johnson. "We also want good customer service."

But last week's announcement angered Ammerman, a spokesman for Victims of Pan Am 103. It's not that he thinks the questions themselves are necessary, it's that he's worried federal authorities are overstating the extent to which security has improved since Sept. 11, and that travelers are shortsighted to complain so much about airport hassles.

He thinks that Americans, in general, have returned with alarming speed to a false sense of security. "There's this bravado, a sense that we're in control, an 'I'll take my chances' attitude," Ammerman said. "It's part and parcel of human nature. As time moves on, you return to the normalcy."