

Private Plane, Public Menace

Wealthy travelers routinely bypass the TSA by flying on private jets. How long until al-Qaeda does the same?

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Teterboro Airport, situated in the New Jersey Meadowlands, a short distance from the Lincoln Tunnel, is the LAX of the American plutocracy. It is an airport given over entirely to “general” aviation—general being a euphemism for “private.” There are many different types of “general aviation” aircraft. A majority are very small, four- or six-seat propeller planes. A minority are much larger corporate jets of the sort found in great numbers on the Teterboro tarmac.

I do not ordinarily have access to corporate-aviation flights, but a few of my friends do, and I feel very warmly toward these friends when they ask me to join them aboard their planes, which is not often enough. Such an invitation came recently while I was in New York City for an appearance on The Colbert Report, during which I discussed our country’s ludicrous aviation-security system. A friend let me know he was flying back to Washington that night on a private plane. Count me in, I said.

The Colbert appearance went passably well and, as a bonus, I had the chance to say the terms testicle and ball sack on national television. This was during a discussion about the vigorous pat-downs now conducted by agents of the Transportation Security Administration on passengers who decline to pass through the imagers. These machines create naked images of passengers, which the federal government promises are not captured and therefore could not leak onto the Internet, even when the passenger in question is, say, Lady Gaga.

Fifteen minutes after leaving Manhattan, we arrived at the airport gate. A private security guard asked my friend for the tail number of our plane. He provided the number—or he provided a few digits of the number—and we were waved through, without an identification check. The plane, I should point out, didn’t belong to my friend; it belonged to a company with which my friend’s business does business. We drove to the terminal—operated by Signature Flight Support, a leading provider of general-aviation services—where we met our co-pilot, who escorted us to the plane.

“You’re Mr. Goldba?” the co-pilot said to me.

“It’s Goldberg,” I said.

“Okay, the e-mail must have gotten cut off or something.”

We continued to the plane. I asked my friend—let’s refer to him as “Osama bin La”—if there would be any security check whatsoever before we went wheels-up. He laughed. “I think the law says we have to pat each other down.”

“Do these pilots know you well?” I asked. “Is that why they trust you to bring me along?”

He first met them that morning, he said, when they flew him to Teterboro.

We climbed aboard the eight-seat twin-engine plane. The pilot greeted us, took my bag from me, and placed it on a seat. I noticed that no door separated the cabin from the cockpit.

We took off a few minutes later and headed south, in the direction of the Pentagon, the White House, and the United States Capitol complex.

“So let’s just say that I’m a terrorist pilot,” I said, “and I have a bag filled with handguns and I shoot these two pilots and then I take control of the plane and steer it into the headquarters of the CIA,” near which we would soon be flying. “What’s stopping me?”

“There’s nothing stopping you,” my friend said. “All you need is money to buy a plane, or a charter.”

Luckily for America, I am not a terrorist, I did not kill the pilots, and I did not steer the plane into the headquarters of the CIA. Nor did I pack my bag with Semtex or a dirty bomb. Instead, I occupied myself by taking free candy and bottles of Evian from the plane’s endless stock of free candy and Evian, which reminded me, as if I needed reminding, that it is better to be rich than poor.

We landed at Dulles International Airport about 40 minutes after we took off. We said good night to the pilots and walked across the tarmac. On the way, we passed far bigger planes than the one on which we had flown: 20- and 30-seat private jets, of obviously significant weight and fuel-storage capacity. Of course, one can charter 757s and 777s for private use as well.

I’ve been writing for years about the TSA, and about the uneven and unthinking methods it employs to secure our nation’s commercial airports. I had been under the impression that the TSA stationed personnel at many general-aviation terminals, but it typically does not. The general-aviation industry is almost entirely “self-regulated.” The TSA has proposed that it be allowed to impose certain security measures on private jets, such as requiring operators to ensure that their passengers are not on the no-fly list, but for now the agency screens only those Americans who cannot afford to fly on private planes. The TSA administrator, John Pistole, suggested he sees a less substantial threat from general aviation than he does in the commercial realm, and the general-aviation “community” is not enthusiastic about government regulation. “Clearly the general-aviation community has a lot of equities and interest in our rules,” he told me, delicately. The TSA does, however, distribute helpful tips to those who work at private-aviation airports, including, “Always lock your aircraft.” And there is this warning: call 911 if you happen to notice “pilots appearing to be under the control of others.”

I am not a terrorist, but I do share one goal with al-Qaeda: I too would like to have a pilot under my control. But, like most Americans, and presumably unlike al-Qaeda, I am not quite rich enough to buy my way out of airport security.

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