A Minute With ™...

aviation security expert Sheldon Jacobson

As a result of the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner on Christmas Day, the Obama administration announced that citizens of 14 “terrorism-prone” countries, along with those who fly through those countries, would be the targets of increased scrutiny by airport security.

Is racial profiling secure enough to allay civil liberty concerns, or would behavioral profiling be more effective and just? Sheldon H. Jacobson, a U. of I. computer science professor, is an expert on aviation security. He was interviewed by News Bureau news editor Phil Ciciora.

Should profiling be used to screen passengers at airports?

While the terrorists remain the same, their tactics are always changing to adjust to our countermeasures. What we need to ask is, under what circumstances should each type of profiling be used?

All types of profiling have their positives and negatives. Profiling is all about collecting and synthesizing information. By asking questions and collecting data, 60 to 70 percent of all passengers could be deemed to have a negligible security risk. It’s the remaining 30 to 40 percent of passengers who require the greatest scrutiny and attention from airport security who pose the greatest risk.

Can we afford “business as usual” in aviation security?

What we need is a reallocation of security resources, not more of them.

Ironically, more screening can result in less security when it directs attention and resources to the 60 to 70 percent of people who are not a security threat. That, in turn, diverts attention and resources away from the people who are a legitimate threat.
For every non-threatening passenger, there is a minimal disruption to an airport’s security infrastructure. However, when that effect is multiplied over all the passengers who fly on a given day, the cumulative effect over time becomes overwhelming, resulting in the system we have today.

By lavishing billions of dollars on screening the wrong passengers, we’re not spending those dollars on the right passengers. Since it takes only one successful act of terrorism for the system to fail, we cannot afford to allocate our finite amounts of time, money and technology in the service of a failed strategy. By focusing on disrupting the terrorists’ tactics rather than stopping the terrorists themselves, the aviation security system will never achieve a sufficient level of security. We simply can’t afford the status quo.

Is there a more socially acceptable solution than profiling?

Any technologies, procedures and information that allow us to keep potential terrorists off of airplanes are likely to be cost-effective, timely and secure. For example, we can introduce some unpredictability into the screening process, which would help keep terrorists on the defensive. But the challenge is achieving all of those goals within acceptable societal norms, in ways that won’t offend our values as an open society.

One solution is to use information about passengers that is voluntarily provided and readily assessable to quickly sort through and eliminate those passengers who are not terrorists. For the remaining pool of passengers, about which less information is known, we subject them to the highest level of security screening, and in some cases, bar them from flying altogether.

We can call this behavioral profiling, information profiling, or whatever term of art or euphemism we wish to employ. But the bottom line is, until we deploy security resources appropriately, we will never achieve a secure air transportation system, and the recent events on Christmas day will become all too common – except on the one occasion when an attack succeeds.