

Airline Security

LEVEL THREE - ADVANCED

Pre-reading activities

- 1 Make a list of the ways in which airlines try to ensure the security of their flights
- 2 The article which follows contains the words "racial profiling is one of the hottest hot-button issues in contemporary America"

What do you understand by "racial profiling"?

What is a "hot-button issue"?

- 3 The article is about the case of Walied Shater, an Arab-American who was refused permission to board a flight from Baltimore to Dallas-Fort Worth on Christmas Day. Which of the following reasons do you think may have been responsible for this refusal:

- | | |
|--|---|
| a Mr Shater had a gun | f He had an Arabic name |
| b He was carrying a book on Arab history | g He was sweating profusely |
| c He was nervous and agitated | h He pretended to be a secret service agent |
| d He was of Middle-Eastern appearance | i He had weapons in his luggage |
| e He behaved in a confrontational manner | j He filled in a form incorrectly |

- 4 Now read the article and check your answers.

Airline Security: Dishonest words on racial profiling muddy debate on airline security

WASHINGTON DIARY JULIAN BORGER

It was a scene that a Hollywood scriptwriter might have dreamt up for one of those earnest television dramas that explore contemporary issues. But in this real-life scenario there has been no sex or romance.

It is Christmas Day, three months after the trauma of September 11, and a planeload of exhausted, slightly nervous passengers are heading home at the last minute for the holidays, on American Airlines flight 363 from Baltimore Washington International airport to Dallas-Fort Worth. As has happened on many commercial flights since the terrorist attacks, an Arab-American undergoes scrutiny. He objects, but is ultimately left at the gate. Such situations have become a fact of life on domestic flights in the United States, but this time it is different. It turns out that the Arab-American, Walied Shater, is a secret serviceman on his way to guard President George Bush at the "Western White House" in Crawford, Texas. Big trouble ensues.

The Christmas incident was doomed to degenerate into a rhetoric-laden mess as soon as the first lawyer or television pundit used the two words "racial profiling" - one of the hottest of hot-button issues in contemporary America. The President himself threatened he would be "madder than heck" if it turned out that Shater was a victim of such a practice, in which citizens are picked out for special attention because of skin colour, name or religion. American Airlines denied Shater had been kicked off the flight because of his Arab-American identity. Instead, the troubled airline (which lost two

planes on September 11) published critical accounts of his behaviour, describing him as irate and confrontational. He had filled in a form allowing government security officers to carry guns on planes, but had filled it in wrongly twice. His identity was eventually confirmed by the Secret Service, but he had become so truculent by then it was judged best to leave him behind.

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Shater has hired lawyers to demand an apology and force a change in the airline's security measures. The lawyers have gone on television to deny the claims that the presidential bodyguard had behaved unprofessionally. It was the pilot, the lawyers insist, who was confrontational. They say that there had been no problem with the gun-carrying forms until the pilot became aware of the passenger's Arab-American identity and a flight attendant discovered a book on Arab history among his possessions.

It looks like one of those simmering affairs that will run and run on the radio talk-shows. Furthermore the whole discussion is handicapped, from the President down, by a fundamental dishonesty about the issues in play.

It is a fact that Arab-Americans and people with Muslim names have been subjected to much more scrutiny than fellow passengers on flights since September 11. There have been multiple cases of people being left off planes because the flight crew and the passengers felt queasy about their Middle Eastern appearance. A commercial airline pilot I know told me in blunt terms that one of the key items on the "new security" checklist is scanning the passenger manifest for Islamic names. American Airlines' claim that Shater's Arab-American identity and his book on Arab history had nothing to do with the pilot's decision looks dubious, to say the least. It is hard to imagine the same situation arising with a blond secret serviceman possessing a book about the American civil war, but the airline insists it would have acted in an identical manner.

So, because ethnicity is supposed to have nothing to do with the incident, the airline has resorted to pushing out damaging accounts of the secret serviceman's behaviour, possibly endangering his career prospects. It is a recipe for anger. The refusal to acknowledge the issue of ethnicity has just driven it underground, with the result that neither the effectiveness of ethnic screening nor its civil rights implications can be properly addressed.

The fact that all 19 of the hijackers involved in the September 11 attacks were Muslim Arabs has inevitably had an effect on the perceptions of airline pilots and crews. It would be extraordinary if it had not. The overwhelming majority of trainees who went through al-Qaida's Afghan camps were Muslims from the Middle East or South Asia. It is possible to argue, then, that there might be a significant security benefit in giving particular attention to passengers who fit that profile. On the other hand, the role of a Briton, Richard Reid, a Muslim with a non-Muslim name, in the shoe-bomb attempt on an American Airlines flight before Christmas was a clear reminder that the assailants in the next attack may not conform to the stereotype. Al-Qaida has shown itself adept at varying its line of attack.

This is a debate worth having. If it was decided that there was a significant benefit to using elements of ethnic profiling in security screening, there could be further discussion of how to minimise the trade-off between security and the civil rights of those targeted. For example, confirming that a passenger was a secret serviceman with one of the highest security levels in the land should have been more than sufficient to outweigh the fact that he was of Arab descent. These issues are currently being ducked because the phrase "racial profiling", associated with redneck cops arbitrarily stopping black motorists for questioning, is politically radioactive. But the consequences of this national queasiness are bad for both air safety and civil rights.

The Guardian Weekly 10-1-2002, page 4

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5 Find words in paragraphs 1-3 of the text that mean the following:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| a very tired | f certain to happen (with a negative outcome) |
| b happens afterwards | g expert |
| c careful investigation | h extremely angry (2 expressions) |
| d in the end / finally | i ejected |
| e follows | j bad-tempered and aggressive (2 expressions) |

6 Phrasal Verbs. Look at the third paragraph again. Find phrasal verbs which mean the following:

- | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| a To complete | c To eject |
| b To select | d To prove to be the case |

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7 Complete these sentences using vocabulary (in an appropriate form) from paragraphs 4-8 of the text:

- The claim that Mr Shater behaved unprofessionally has been _____ by his lawyers.
- A fundamental dishonesty about the issues in play is _____ the whole discussion,
- Since September 11th there has been much more _____ of passengers with Muslim names.
- Passenger manifests are routinely _____ for Islamic names.
- Mr Shater's career prospects may have been _____ by the incident.
- The line of attack may be _____ next time.
- Further discussion may mean that the trade-off between security and the civil rights of those targeted may be _____
- For many people the phrase "racial profiling" has _____ with redneck cops.

2 Discussion

Do you think that racial profiling is justified in the case of airline security?

Which is more important: passenger security or the civil rights of passengers?

What is the best way for airlines to maintain security?