

# HOMELAND SECURITY

## On a Wing and a Prayer

Grievance theater at Minneapolis International Airport.

**BY DEBRA BURLINGAME**

*Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!* Those are the words that started it all. Six bearded imams are said to have shouted them out while offering evening prayers as they and 141 other passengers waited at the gate for their flight out of Minneapolis International Airport. It was three days before Thanksgiving. *Allahu Akbar: God is great.*

Initial media reports of the incident did not include the disturbing details about what happened after they boarded US Airways flight 300, but the story quickly went national with provocative headlines: "Six Muslims Ejected from US Air Flight for Praying." Yes, they were praying--but let's be clear about this. The very last human sound on the cockpit voice recorder of United flight 93 before it screamed into the ground at 580 miles per hour is the sound of male voices shouting "*Allahu Akbar*" in a moment of religious ecstasy.

They, too, were praying. The passengers and crew of flight 93 lost their valiant fight to take back the plane just one hour and 20 minutes after it pushed back from the gate. Until the hijackers stormed the cockpit door, they were just a handful of Middle Eastern-looking men on their way to sunny California. So, yes, let's be exceedingly clear about the whole matter. Some 3,000 men, women and children are dead because the unassuming people on those airplanes did not look at them and see murderers. Or dangerous Arabs. Or fanatical Muslims. They saw a few guys in chinos.

In five years since the 9/11 attacks, U.S. commercial carriers have transported approximately 2.9 billion domestic and international passengers. It is a testament to the flying public, but, most of all, to the flight crews who put those planes into the air and who daily devote themselves to the safety and well-being of their passengers, that they have refused to succumb to ethnic hatred, religious intolerance or irrational fear on those millions of flights. But they have not forgotten the sight of a 200,000-pound aircraft slicing through heavy steel and concrete as easily as a knife through butter. They still remember the voices of men and women in the prime of their lives saying final goodbyes, people who just moments earlier set down their coffee and looked out the window to a beautiful new morning. Today, when travelers and flight crews arrive at the airport, all the overheated rhetoric of the civil rights absolutists, all the empty claims of government career bureaucrats, all the disingenuous promises

of the election-focused politicians just fall away. They have families. They have responsibilities. To them, this is not a game or a cause. This is real life.

Given that Islamic terrorists continue their obsession with turning airplanes into weapons of mass destruction, it is nothing short of obscene that these six religious leaders--fresh from attending a conference of the North American Imams Federation, featuring discussions on "Imams and Politics" and "Imams and the Media"--chose to turn that airport into a stage and that airplane into a prop in the service of their need for grievance theater. The reality is, these passengers endured a frightening 3 1/2-hour ordeal, which included a front-to-back sweep of the aircraft with a bomb-sniffing dog, in order to advance the provocative agenda of these imams in, of all the inappropriate places after 9/11, U.S. airports.

*"Allahu Akbar"* was just the opening act. After boarding, they did not take their assigned seats but dispersed to seats in the first row of first class, in the midcabin exit rows and in the rear--the exact configuration of the 9/11 execution teams. The head of the group, seated closest to the cockpit, and two others asked for a seatbelt extension, kept on board for obese people. A heavy metal buckle at the end of a long strap, it can easily be used as a lethal weapon. The three men rolled them up and placed them on the floor under their seats. And lest this entire incident be written off as simple cultural ignorance, a frightened Arabic-speaking passenger pulled aside a crew member and translated the imams' suspicious conversations, which included angry denunciations of Americans, furious grumblings about U.S. foreign policy, Osama Bin Laden and "killing Saddam."

Predictably, these imams and their attorneys now suggest that another passenger who penned a frantic note of warning and slipped it to a flight attendant was somehow a hysterical Islamophobe. Let us remember that but for their performance at the gate this passenger might never have noticed these men or their behavior on board, much less have the slightest clue as to their religion or political passions. Of course, that was the point of the shouting. According to the police report, yet another alarmed passenger who frequently travels to the Middle East described a conversation with one of the imams. The 31-year-old Egyptian expressed fundamentalist Muslim views, and stated the he would go to whatever measures necessary to obey all the tenets set out in the Koran.

The activist Muslim American Society (MAS) issued a press release within hours of the incident, demanding an apology and announcing a "pray-in" at Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C. Standing just a short distance from the Pentagon, where five years ago black plumes of smoke from the crash of American Airlines flight 77 could be seen for miles, the assembled demonstrators complained that African-American Muslims, accustomed to "driving while black," must now cope with the injustice of "flying while Muslim." This brazen two-step is racial politics at its worst; none of the imams are African-American. MAS, which teaches an "Activist Training" program with lessons on "how to talk to the media," must have been thrilled when one cable news outfit, suckered by the rhetoric, compared the imams' conduct to

that of civil rights icon Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her bus seat in the face of institutional racism. One wonders what the parents of the three 11-year-olds who died on flight 77--all African-American kids on a National Geographic field trip--would make of this stunning comparison.

Today, MAS Executive Director Mahdi Bray says his organization wants more than an apology. He wants to "hit [US Airways] where it hurts, the pocketbook," and, joined by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), will seek compensation for the imams, civil and federal monetary sanctions, and new, sweeping legislation that will extract even bigger penalties for airlines that engage in "racial and religious profiling." An investigation by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties is under way. Not incidentally, it is the "fatwa department" of MAS that pushed for segregated taxi lines that would permit Muslim cab drivers at the Minneapolis airport to reject passengers carrying alcohol.

Here's what the flying public needs to know about airplanes and civil rights: Once your foot traverses the entranceway of a commercial airliner, you are no longer in a democracy in which everyone gets a vote and minority rights are affirmatively protected in furtherance of fuzzy, ever-shifting social policy. Ultimately, the responsibility for your personal safety and security rests on the shoulders of one person, the pilot in command. His primary job is to safely transport you and your belongings from one place to another. Period.

This is the doctrine of "captain's authority." It has a longstanding history and a statutory mandate, further strengthened after 9/11, which recognizes that flight crews are our last line of defense between the kernel of a terrorist plot and its lethal execution. The day we tell the captain of a commercial airliner that he cannot remove a problem passenger unless he divines beyond question what is in that passenger's head and heart is the day our commercial aviation system begins to crumble. When a passenger's conduct is so disturbing and disruptive that reasonable, ordinary people fear for their lives, the captain must have the discretionary authority to respond without having to consider equal protection or First Amendment standards about which even trained lawyers with the clarity of hindsight might strongly disagree. The pilot in command can't get it wrong. At 35,000 feet, when multiple events are rapidly unfolding in real time, there is no room for error.

We have a new, inviolate aviation standard after 9/11, which requires that the captain cannot take that airplane up so long as there are any unresolved issues with respect to the security of his airplane. At altitude, the cockpit door is barred and crews are instructed not to open them no matter what is happening in the cabin behind them. This is an extremely challenging situation for the men and women who fly those planes, one that those who write federal aviation regulations and the people who agitate for more restrictions on a captain's authority will never have to face themselves.

Likewise, flight attendants are confined in the back of the plane with upwards of 200 people; they must be the eyes and ears, not just for the pilot but for us all. They are not combat specialists, however, and to compel them to ignore all but the most unambiguous cases of suspicious behavior is to further enable terrorists who act in ways meant to defy easy categorization. As the American Airlines flight attendants who literally jumped on "shoe bomber" Richard Reid demonstrated, cabin crews are sharply attuned to unusual or abnormal behavior and they must not be second-guessed, or hamstrung by misguided notions of political correctness.

Ultimately, the most despicable aspect about the imams' behavior is that when they pierced the normally quiet hum of a passenger waiting area with shouts of "*Allahu Akbar*" and deliberately engaged in terrorist-associated behavior that was sure to trigger suspicion, they exploited the fear that began with the Sept. 11 attacks. The imams, experienced travelers all, counted on the security system established after 9/11 to kick in, and now they plan not only to benefit financially from the proper operation of that system but to substantially weaken it--with help from the Saudi-endowed attorneys at CAIR.

US Airways is right to stand by its flight crew. It will be both dangerous and disgraceful if the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Transportation and, ultimately, our federal courts allow aviation security measures put in place after 9/11 to be cynically manipulated in the name of civil rights.

*Ms. Burlingame, a director of the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation, is the sister of Charles F. "Chic" Burlingame III, the pilot of American Airlines flight 77, which was crashed into the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.*