

Don't let politics board airplanes

Maybe we should board airplanes in our underwear.

I'm not trying to make light of a serious issue, but that idea did come up in the newsroom last week when airports began making passengers dump bottled water, shampoo and contact lens solution after the British foiled a terrorist plot.

Makes you wonder: What is the ultimate answer for safer air travel?

Kenneth Hansen says banning water bottles isn't it.

Hansen is an assistant professor of political science at Fresno State who studies homeland security issues. He believes confiscating people's



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toothpaste, perfume and sunscreen is a bit much.

"This needs to be kept in perspective," he said.

"Terrorism is a serious

thing — but you probably have a greater threat from spiders in your garage than Islamic terrorists."

Hansen says the British — whose expertise in catching plotters was demonstrated with last week's arrests — are on the right track in the war on terrorism.

"The victory is going to be won, or not, with counterterrorism, not with confiscating things when people board airplanes," he said. Efforts should be more focused on catching would-be terrorists before a plot unfolds.

"You've got to hand it to the Brits," Hansen said, adding that they've had much experience in this area because of their long fight with the Irish Republican Army.

Banning all carry-on luggage, with exceptions for children's items and for people with special needs, isn't a practical answer, Hansen thinks. "I don't know that people would put up with that," he said.

Yep, we gotta have our stuff when we travel — water, reading material, iPods, CD players. I don't fly that often but I have learned to take along a few snacks since calling airline food "meals" is a stretch.

Hansen says that if we really want to get serious about airline security we should do what the Israelis do: focus much more on people's behavior and what they carry on board, rather than single out people for searches based on their appearance or random selection.

Profiling doesn't work because that changes. Pregnant women are now potential suicide bombers.

"In this country, we think we're looking for Osama bin Laden to walk through the airport," Hansen said.

And, of course, politics is a factor in the debate. It didn't take long last week for Democrats and Republicans to start sniping at each other over which party is doing more to make us safe in the air.

"I think it needs to be more logical and less emotional and less political," Hansen said.

But all this, too, could pass and water bottles may some day be OK again. Remember that nail clippers were banned at one time.

Air travel will never be foolproof, and we just have to assume a certain amount of risk when we travel.

In the meantime, beware of those spiders in your garage.

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