

Inspector General of the Department of Transportation told us, there were great pressures from the air carriers to control security costs and to “limit the impact of security requirements on aviation operations, so that the industry could concentrate on its primary mission of moving passengers and aircraft. . . . [T]hose counterpressures in turn manifested themselves as significant weaknesses in security.” A longtime FAA security official described the air carriers’ approach to security regulation as “decry, deny and delay” and told us that while “the air carriers had seen the enlightened hand of self-interest with respect to safety, they hadn’t seen it in the security arena.”⁵⁹

The final layer, security on board commercial aircraft, was not designed to counter suicide hijackings. The FAA-approved “Common Strategy” had been elaborated over decades of experience with scores of hijackings, beginning in the 1960s. It taught flight crews that the best way to deal with hijackers was to accommodate their demands, get the plane to land safely, and then let law enforcement or the military handle the situation. According to the FAA, the record had shown that the longer a hijacking persisted, the more likely it was to end peacefully. The strategy operated on the fundamental assumption that hijackers issue negotiable demands (most often for asylum or the release of prisoners) and that, as one FAA official put it, “suicide wasn’t in the game plan” of hijackers. FAA training material provided no guidance for flight crews should violence occur.⁶⁰

This prevailing Common Strategy of cooperation and nonconfrontation meant that even a hardened cockpit door would have made little difference in a hijacking. As the chairman of the Security Committee of the Air Line Pilots Association observed when proposals were made in early 2001 to install reinforced cockpit doors in commercial aircraft, “Even if you make a vault out of the door, if they have a noose around my flight attendant’s neck, I’m going to open the door.” Prior to 9/11, FAA regulations mandated that cockpit doors permit ready access into and out of the cockpit in the event of an emergency. Even so, rules implemented in the 1960s required air crews to keep the cockpit door closed and locked in flight. This requirement was not always observed or vigorously enforced.⁶¹

As for law enforcement, there were only 33 armed and trained federal air marshals as of 9/11. They were not deployed on U.S. domestic flights, except when in transit to provide security on international departures. This policy reflected the FAA’s view that domestic hijacking was in check—a view held confidently as no terrorist had hijacked a U.S. commercial aircraft anywhere in the world since 1986.⁶²

In the absence of any recent aviation security incident and without “specific and credible” evidence of a plot directed at civil aviation, the FAA’s leadership focused elsewhere, including on operational concerns and the ever-present issue of safety. FAA Administrator Garvey recalled that “every day in 2001 was like the day before Thanksgiving.” Heeding calls for improved air