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Nation of police? It's very crucial
By Lawrence J. Haas

“IF YOU SEE it, say it.” That’s the slogan of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which asks passengers to report suspicious behavior or unattended items to transit employees.

Two years ago, NJ Transit asked employees and passengers to be on the lookout for suspicious people and property. It set up a phone line to handle tips and invested in an advertising campaign designed to heighten emergency preparedness. Posters went up on trains, buses and train and bus stations encouraging public vigilance. The number, 1-888 TIPS-NJT is still taking calls.

On the anti-terror beat, New Jersey state troopers routinely visit businesses in critical areas to “build relationships” and give out fliers promoting the agency’s tip line.

New Jersey’s Office of Counterterrorism fields hundreds of calls from people who fear the next threat could come from their own back yards.

These were essentially the same messages that transportation, law enforcement and other bodies send to people across America, asking their help in thwarting terrorism.

Our government cannot, alone, protect us from attack. Average people must be aware of their surroundings, on the lookout for suspicious activity, and eager to relay their concerns to law enforcement and other authorities.

A lawsuit filed in Minneapolis, however, is threatening the ability of average people to play this crucial role. Six imams are suing US Airways, the city’s airport authority, and, most troubling, soon-to-be-named “John Does” who raised concerns about their behavior before a flight, prompting the airline to remove them from the plane.

If successful, that lawsuit would have a chilling effect on the willingness of other “John Does” to play this role.

Rewards in Jersey

The store clerk in New Jersey who helped thwart a plot by several Muslims to kill soldiers at Fort Dix this year might not have stepped forward. How many other potential heroes might decide that a lawsuit isn’t worth the trouble is anyone’s guess.

That’s why Congress, which is considering legislation to protect terrorism whistleblowers from federal or state lawsuits, must send a bill to President Bush for his signature as soon as possible.

In late November, the six imams were scheduled to fly from Minneapolis to Phoenix. As passengers settled into their seats, the imams spread out, sitting in twos in the front, middle and back of the plane while ignoring their seat assignments. They asked for seat belt extenders, though they did not seem to need any, raising concerns that they planned to use them as weapons. They also spoke loudly and disparagingly about the United States.

Not surprisingly, some passengers grew concerned and expressed their views to airline officials. The airline, in turn, removed the imams from the flight, questioned them in the terminal and released them. The imams responded with the lawsuit in question.

That people should not fear lawsuits for helping to thwart terrorism should be a no-brainer. But on Capitol Hill, critics have argued that some people could level bogus charges against Muslims or anyone with whom they have a beef, forcing innocent Americans to defend themselves.

Protecting innocent

Fair point. And to their credit, the leading sponsors of “John Doe” legislation have acknowledged the possibility. A bill by Reps. Peter King, R-N.Y., Steve Pearce, R-N.M., and Bill Shuster, R-Pa., and another by Sens. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., explicitly do not protect from lawsuit anyone who knowingly files false charges.

The bills’ sponsors also made their legislation retroactive to last November, ensuring that, if enacted, it will supersede any potentially negative ruling in the imams’ lawsuit.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, average people from California to Maine asked how they could help protect America. They never received a very good answer from the Bush administration, which suggested that they shop in order to keep the economy humming.

Nevertheless, average people stepped forward. They include the “John Does” in Minneapolis, the store clerk in New Jersey and the many people who call tip lines, like NJ Transit’s. An agency said every call is followed up, and many calls have been helpful.

The last thing that our government should do is allow others to put a legal roadblock in the way of future terrorism whistleblowers. Rather than await the outcome of a lawsuit in Minneapolis, Congress should act now to protect Americans who are trying to protect our homeland.

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