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To: declan@well.com, gnu@new.toad.com

Subject: I was ejected from an airplane today for wearing a "Suspected Terrorist" button

Date: Fri, 18 Jul 2003 21:29:28 -0700

From: John Gilmore <gnu@toad.com>

[Gilmore is one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation - [www.eff.org](http://www.eff.org)]

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for wearing a "Suspected Terrorist" button**

**by John Gilmore**

**18 July 2003**

*Declan McCullagh's Politech*

Your readers already know about my opposition to useless airport security crap. I'm suing John Ashcroft, two airlines, and various other agencies over making people show IDs to fly -- an intrusive measure that provides no security. (See [freetotravel.org](http://freetotravel.org)). But I would be hard pressed to come up with a security measure more useless and intrusive than turning a plane around because of a political button on someone's lapel.

My sweetheart Annie and I tried to fly to London today (Friday) on British Airways. We started at SFO, showed our passports and got through all the rigamarole, and were seated on the plane while it taxied out toward takeoff. Suddenly a flight steward, Cabin Service Director Khaleel Miyan, loomed in front of me and demanded that I remove a small 1" button pinned to my left lapel. I declined, saying that it was a political statement and that he had no right to censor passengers' political speech. The button, which was created by political activist Emi Koyama, says "Suspected Terrorist". Large images of the button and I appear in the cover story of *Reason Magazine* this month, and the story is entitled "Suspected Terrorist".

The steward returned with Capt. Peter Hughes. The captain requested, and then demanded, that I remove the button (they called it a "badge"). He said that I would endanger the aircraft and commit a federal crime if I did not take it off. I told him that it was a political statement and declined to remove it.

They turned the plane around and brought it back to the gate, delaying 300 passengers on a full flight.

We were met at the jetway by Carol Spear, Station Manager for BA at SFO. She stated that since the captain had told her he was refusing to transport me as a passenger, she had no other course but to take me off the plane. I offered no resistance. I reminded her of the court case that United lost when their captain removed a Middle Eastern man who had done

nothing wrong, merely because "he made me uncomfortable". She said that she had no choice but to uphold the captain and that we could sort it out in court later, if necessary. She said that my button was in "poor taste".

Later, after consulting with (unspecified) security people, Carol said that if we wanted to fly on the second and last flight of the day, we would be required to remove the button and put it into our checked luggage (or give it to her). And also, our hand-carried baggage would have to be searched to make sure that we didn't carry any more of these terrorist buttons onto the flight and put them on, endangering the mental states of the passengers and crew.

I said that I understood that she had refused me passage on the first flight because the captain had refused to carry me, but I didn't understand why I was being refused passage on the second one. I suggested that BA might have captains with different opinions about free speech, and that I'd be happy to talk with the second captain to see if he would carry me. She said that the captain was too busy to talk with me, and that speaking broadly, she didn't think BA had any captains who would allow someone on a flight wearing a button that said "Suspected Terrorist". She said that BA has discretion to decline to fly anyone. (And here I had thought they were a common carrier, obliged to carry anyone who'll pay the fare, without discrimination.) She said that passengers and crew are nervous about terrorism and that mentioning it bothers them, and that is grounds to exclude me. I suggested that if they wanted to exclude mentions of terrorists from the airplane, then they should remove all the newspapers from it too.

I asked whether I would be permitted to fly if I wore other buttons, perhaps one saying "Hooray for Tony Blair". She said she thought that would be OK. I said, how about "Terrorism is Evil". She said that I probably wouldn't get on. I started to discuss other possible buttons, like "Oppose Terrorism", trying to figure out what kinds of political speech I would be permitted to express in a BA plane, but she said that we could stand there making hypotheticals all night and she wasn't interested. Ultimately, I was refused passage because I would not censor myself at her command.

After the whole interaction was over, I offered to tell her, just for her own information, what the button means and why I wear it. She was curious. I told her that it refers to all of us, everyone, being suspected of being terrorists, being searched without cause, being queued in lines and pens, forced to take our shoes off, to identify ourselves, to drink our own breast milk, to submit to indignities. Everyone is a suspected terrorist in today's America, including all the innocent people, and that's wrong. That's what it means. The terrorists have won if we turn our country into an authoritarian theocracy "to defeat terrorism". I suggested that British Airways had demonstrated that trend brilliantly today. She understood but wasn't sympathetic -- like most of the people whose individual actions are turning the country into a police state.

Annie asked why she, Annie, was not allowed to fly. She wasn't wearing or carrying any objectionable buttons. Carol said it's because of her association with me. I couldn't have put it better myself -- guilt by association. I asked whether Annie would have been able to fly if she had checked in separately, and got no answer. (Indeed it was I who pointed out to the crew that Annie and I were traveling together, since we were seated about ten rows apart due to the full flight. I was afraid that they'd take me off the plane without her even knowing.)

Annie later told me that the stewardess who had gone to fetch her said that she thought the button was something that the security people had made me wear to warn the flight crew that I was a suspected terrorist(!). Now that would be really secure.

I spoke with the passengers around me before being removed from the plane, and none of them seemed to have any problem with sitting next to me for 10 hours going to London. None of them had even noticed the button before the crew pointed it out, and none of them objected to it after seeing it. It was just the crew that had problems, as far as I could tell.

John Gilmore

PS: For those who know I don't fly in the US because of the ID demand: I'm willing to show a passport to travel to another country. I'm not willing to show ID -- an "internal passport" -- to fly within my own country.

Previous Politech messages:

- "John Gilmore's suit over secret FAA regs in SF court on 1/17"  
<http://www.politechbot.com/p-04312.html>
- "John Gilmore sues Feds over secret your-papers-please rule"  
<http://www.politechbot.com/p-03776.html>
- And here's an article I wrote seven years ago about John:  
<http://hotwired.wired.com/netizen/96/37/special3a.html>

-Declan

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