

President's Desk

Reflections on Sept. 11

INFORMS President

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Sept. 11, 2006, 6:30 p.m., Gate C21, Logan Airport, Boston, Mass., waiting for United Airlines flight 545 from Boston to Chicago.

For the third time in the five years since Sept. 11, 2001, I find myself flying on Sept. 11. In 2003, I was en route to Singapore. Last year, I flew to Baltimore for a memorial service for Chuck ReVelle, a close colleague of many of us. Today, I am flying home from Boston after spending the last three days with my mother who underwent emergency surgery last week.

Perhaps all this flying on Sept. 11 is chance. Certainly, I did not plan any of these flights for this particular day. On the other hand, maybe these flights are my quiet way of saying to those who would do us harm that they have not won.

As I sit at the gate watching the continuous CNN coverage of the aftermath of Sept. 11 — they are now asking "experts" whether we are safer now than we were five years ago and the consensus is that we are not — I find myself reflecting on two issues. The first is the problem of allocating limited resources that surfaced three times during this trip. As I checked in for the flight to Baltimore last Wednesday (to visit INFORMS and NSF before flying unexpectedly to Boston), I was preceded through security by three U.S. Army soldiers wearing green camouflage battle fatigues. I watched as they removed their shirts and struggled to take off their heavy boots to make it through security. As we were getting dressed on the "sterile" side of the screening area, I thanked them for their service to the country and told them that I found it ironic that they, too, had to go through this sort of search. They assured me that they were used to it. When I asked where they were off to, they said, "Baghdad." "Be safe," I said as we headed in different directions.

An hour ago, I was selected for additional screening — a pat down and a careful check of my carry-on baggage — before being allowed to proceed to my gate. While the process took less than five minutes, I again wondered if this was the best use of our limited resources. I asked the TSA agent how they select people for additional screening, and he

replied that it was a combination of factors. I think I was selected because I purchased a one-way ticket only yesterday after learning my mother would be released from the hospital today. He then added, "I don't like profiling, but . . ." Me too. I don't like profiling, but we need to allocate our limited screening resources in a rational and cost-effective manner, even if doing so proves to be politically incorrect.

We live with "profiling" every day. Why else are auto insurance rates for a 16-year-old boy significantly higher than those of his 50-year-old mother? Why are the teenager's life insurance rates lower than those of his mother? Instead of calling this profiling, we refer to it as actuarial science. If we are comfortable with profiling in setting auto and health insurance rates, we should be equally comfortable with using scientific methods to allocate limited security screening resources. More broadly, there are important resource allocations within and across all federal and state programs be they in security, education, health care, transportation or national defense. There is a clear role for INFORMS members in these decisions.

Resource allocation problems surfaced frequently during my mother's recent hospitalization. Like many patients, she spent an extra night in the intensive care unit because they did not have a bed "upstairs" to which she could be moved. Today, we waited for hours for two different doctors to authorize her release from the hospital and for a nurse to finalize the procedure, while others undoubtedly waited in the ICU for her bed to become available. O.R. problems abound in health care.

I must also reflect on the irony associated with my writing this column on the anniversary of the most terrible day in our country's recent history, while many of you will read it close to Thanksgiving. While we may not be more secure than we were five years ago, we surely have much to be thankful for. Whether or not we agree with the administration's policies regarding the war on terror and the war in Iraq, we should all be grateful for the three U.S. soldiers who preceded me through the security check point last week and the hundreds of thousands of other U.S. service men and women who give up their time and risk their lives so that we can enjoy the many freedoms that we often take for granted. The next time you see servicemen in uniform, thank them for their service to the country.

Personally, I am also grateful to the EMTs, nurses and doctors who saved my mother's life last week and who gave her outstanding care. I am very grateful for my own good health and that of my family, as I have many friends whose health is compromised. I wish them all well. I am also grateful for the numerous personal and professional friendships I have made over the years, many of them through INFORMS. Most of all, I am grateful for the love of my two daughters and my wife.

I encourage each of you to be thankful for the many gifts you have and to reflect on how you can use your O.R. expertise to improve the lives of those around you. Happy Thanksgiving!