

Rethinking No Tolerance and Political Correctness

By: Gregory K. Moffatt, Ph.D.

All of us have heard stories from airports, schools and workplaces where people have been arrested or disciplined for ridiculous infractions of no-tolerance policies. I take partial responsibility for this extremism. Since the early 90's I have lectured at the FBI Academy, for other law enforcement agencies, at schools and at businesses. I have also written extensively on how to prevent violent behavior and since my first book I have been an advocate of zero-tolerance policies for violence, drugs, and sexual harassment, but the intent of the policies I have proposed have morphed into creatures that scarcely resemble what I initially had in mind. No-tolerance has turned into "no common sense."

A policy is helpful as a guideline, but it should never be a structure that overrides common sense. Blind acceptance of a policy is easier to implement, but it would never be possible to write a policy that could replace the judgment necessary to consider all the possible circumstances surrounding a given situation. The no-tolerance policies that I had in mind when I first began encouraging school systems and businesses to adopt them were intended to be guidelines. No tolerance for weapons, for example, doesn't mean a supervisor or principal shouldn't use common sense.

Beyond Ridiculous – Schools And Airports

Schools are perhaps the most frustrating perpetrators of no-sense policies. For example, one child was expelled for wearing a plastic ax on his Halloween costume. Numerous cases exist where grade school students have been suspended for forming a gun with their fingers while playing cops and robbers. In Colorado, three 7th grade boys were suspended for playing with a laser pointer that was considered a "firearm facsimile" by school administrators. In Florida, a sophomore was suspended for bringing nail clippers. Perhaps the most egregious example of all is the case in Virginia where an 8th grader was suspended for possessing a knife that he took away from a classmate who was planning to kill herself. In this case, officials for the school admitted that his behavior was noble, but they bowed to the ever-important no-tolerance policy.

The list of weapons that is supposed to serve as a guide has become god. A high school student cannot bring a club to school, but he can carry a baseball bat. We allow kids to drive automobiles on campus – the very mode by which most deaths among teens will occur - but we won't allow them to have a pair of hedge trimmers in the trunk of their vehicles for their after school jobs. Which is the weapon? Anything could be a weapon. Just because it is not on the list of things that are considered weapons doesn't mean it couldn't be one and just because it is on a list doesn't make it one.

No tolerance for drugs is also a reasonable guideline, but what is a drug. In Colorado, a 6-year-old was suspended for bringing lemon drops to school and in Alabama a third-grader was suspended for five days for taking a vitamin. We will not allow a child to use an asthma inhaler without permission, but she can consume as much caffeine as she wants. Which one is the drug?

Airport screeners are no better at using common sense. I appreciate the complexity of protecting our nation, but the majority of what the TSA does in screening passengers is pointless at best – malicious at its worst. Numerous women have had their under wire bras searched. In one airport, TSA agents forced a woman to drink breast milk from one of three bottles she had to ensure it is real breast milk. Other stories abound of women and teenaged girls being physically groped, old people with canes and wheelchairs being harassed, and even babies being subjected to invasive searches. In yet another instance, a woman who had

undergone a double mastectomy set off the metal detector and even though the woman showed these security geniuses her medical ID card proving she had a surgically implanted steel rod, they forced her to remove her blouse and bra so they could see for themselves. They get paid for this?

The absurd TSA policies extend to pilots as well. Pilots that we trust with the aircraft and all on board can't be trusted to carry a pair of tweezers or a fingernail file. Kopel and Petteys of the National Review noted that, "every pilot already controls a weapon thousands of times more powerful than a handgun."¹ Yet we still screen them like everyone else.

The TSA points to all of the weapons it has gathered (the vast majority are dangerous "weapons" like tweezers, nail clippers, and miniature pocket knives) as evidence that the system is working, but that is like digging up every square inch of Gettysburg, PA and pointing to the collection of musket balls you find. Just because you find them, doesn't mean they were a threat nor does it justify the extent of the search. One must ask how many of those TSA-confiscated weapons were actually weapons. Likewise, of those that the normal person would consider a weapon, how many were accidentally left in handbags and briefcases and represented no real threat to the airline or its passengers? All of this is eclipsed by the fact that a number of people have tested the TSA and successfully smuggled actual weapons like pepper spray, knives, and guns on board aircraft.

I have no special military training, yet I could easily fashion a weapon out of materials that are regularly found on airplanes. Likewise, I've studied many homicides that have been committed with objects that currently are allowed on airplanes. (I won't mention them for fear that the TSA might lunge at the opportunity to lengthen their list of taboo items.) There is no way that the TSA could remove every possible item that could be used as a weapon. There would be no plane, no crew, and no passengers.

The debate over whether or not pilots should have guns was also absurd. A pilot who is highly trained, highly educated, and exceptionally disciplined can be trusted with a 100-ton aircraft and 250 or more lives, but we aren't sure if he or she is skilled enough to be trusted with a .38. On the other hand, we will readily trust a sky marshal to carry a weapon – one who has a fraction of the training, education and discipline. If I had to choose I would rather place my trust in the pilot. Instead, however, we have created hundreds of government jobs and we pay these sky marshals to do what is perhaps the world's most boring job simply because we aren't sure a pilot could handle a gun. Give me a break.

Others expressed concern that a terrorist might take the weapon away from pilots. Come on. The firearm in a pilot's hands is locked behind the cockpit door. With a sky marshal, and absolutely EVERYONE on the plane who is paying any attention knows who that is, may be sitting right next to a potential hijacker. In which location is the firearm more secure?

Sexual Harassment And Political Correctness

We've come a long way from the chauvinistic days when women were treated as objects and patronized by men, even in professional settings. No one wants to return to those days. However, sexual harassment, like "weapons," is a matter of definition. In Texas, a 12-year-old boy was suspended for three days for "sexual harassment." His offence? Sticking his tongue out at a girl. In another state a 10-year-old girl was suspended for "sexual harassment." Her offence was asking a boy if he liked her. Grown-ups are no better. In the workplace, sexual harassment suits have been filed because men opened doors for women or told them they looked nice. What's wrong with looking nice? If I had on a nice tie, I wouldn't suppose it was sexual harassment because somebody noticed. Isn't that sort of the point?

Political correctness is no different. Once again our schools lead the day when an 11-year-old British boy was charged with a "racist greeting" for saying "G'Day" to an Australian student. Across the country we

have exchanged holiday names like Halloween, Easter, and Christmas for titles like Fall Festival, Spring Celebration, and Holiday Season. It is argued that we should be tolerant of all cultures, but for some reason it is politically correct to recognize Kwanza, but politically incorrect to recognize Christmas. Does this mean we should recognize and honor our differences as long as they aren't traditional? In an attempt to be politically sensitive we are losing our own distinctiveness.

A student services officer at one of the State Universities of New York once told me about an assignment he had to pick up a visiting academic dignitary at the airport. He was given nothing but a sketchy description of the man. As passengers from the dignitary's flight disembarked, my friend waited at the end of the jet way looking for someone who looked lost. A small Asian gentleman walked by, but didn't seem to notice my friend. After everyone was off the plane, the gate area was empty except for my friend and the Asian man who, by this time, was fuming. He believed my friend had deliberately snubbed him. When my friend asked his boss why he hadn't been told the man was Asian, the boss replied, "We don't recognize race here." Come on! He had to pick him up at the airport. It isn't politically incorrect to recognize that I am Caucasian, that I am male, or that I am tall. These are not matters of opinion or preference.

Profiling

My students at the FBI Academy ardently deny they profile, but of course they do. If they didn't, they wouldn't be doing their jobs. What they mean is that they don't pull over drivers just because they are African-American or Latino. Good. They shouldn't. However, they profile all the time. Suppose they were called about a bank robbery. On the way they see a man running down the street away from the bank with a bag in each hand. If they didn't profile, they would not suppose that it was possible the man had something to do with the robbery. The man's dress and behavior don't guarantee he is guilty of the crime, but he sure looks suspicious.

Once again airport policies demonstrate how we fail to use common sense. We have very few tools for fighting terrorists. The very best one we have is that they all tend to look alike, yet we pretend we don't notice that similarity. If all terrorists wore a big sign that said, "I'm a terrorist" on the front of their shirts, would we ignore such an obvious potential sign of a terrorist connection? I'm not suggesting we put all middle-eastern men in interment camps. I am merely suggesting that we pay more attention to men who fit the obvious pattern and less attention to babies and under wire bras.

The Risks And Solutions

At the very least, blind acceptance of policy has led to great inconvenience of the flying public, employees, school students, and their parents. Flights are missed, jobs are lost, and reputations are damaged. People are unfairly victimized and humiliated by policy administrators who do not use reasonable discretion. At the outset, much of this process is simply a colossal waste of money and I haven't even begun to touch on the legal and tort implications of these policies.

By continuing this charade, we risk a loss of freedom, distinction, and identity. When we try to protect everyone's feelings we call for no personal responsibility. We are not guaranteed a risk free existence where our feelings will never be hurt or we will never be inconvenienced. The best we can do is create a reasonable environment – we can manage risk.

Here is what we can do. First of all, allow law enforcement to do their jobs. Profile when necessary, especially at the airport, but always within the parameters of the law. Someone once said the difference between Israel and America in protecting air travel is that Americans look for weapons while Israelis look for terrorists. We could learn a lesson here.

Perhaps most importantly the general public needs to grow up. Quit worrying so much about who offends whom. Of course we should be sensitive and not intentionally hurt each other, but we have taken sensitivity to a ridiculous extreme creating a culture where people believe they should never have their feelings hurt. Get over it.

Political correctness and no-tolerance policies today are reflective of Ayn Rand's 1938 novel *Anthem* in which a society has moved to such an extreme that any exercise of individual judgment is not only discouraged, but outlawed. As a college professor, I recognize that students who blindly accept what I teach are easier students to deal with, but I also recognize that even when they might earn good grades this type of student is inferior to the student who respectfully challenges me on occasion. A culture that blindly follows policy is far easier to manage, but it is reflective of a much lower level of mental functioning. I fear we have created a culture of non-thinking, compliant responders who not only are afraid to think on their own, but maybe are incapable of it.

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1Dave Kopel & David Petteys, July 2, 2003, [nationalreviewonline.com](http://www.nationalreviewonline.com), Air Neglect, Retrieved from <http://www.nationalreview.com/kopel/kopel070203.asp>.