

Aerial Blackmail

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Only the most uninformed can have been surprised by the latest aerial hijacking and by the ordeals of the unfortunates on the three planes seized by Arab terrorists. The fanatical commando group involved was earlier responsible for many similar outrages. Seven weeks ago these criminals demonstrated the political profitability of hijacking by extorting a promise from the Greek Government to release their jailed confederates. Buoyed by past successes, the Arab gunmen had every reason to suppose aerial blackmail would work against other states. Their judgment appears to have been sound. This outcome can only encourage more acts of piracy by political zealots in every part of the world.

The latest developments raise questions about the assumption that supine surrender to a hijacker is the best way to assure plane passengers' safety. As matters worked out, it was the passengers on the El Al plane, whose crew was prepared to fight back and did so, that fared best. Nonresistance made sense when it could be assumed that a hijacked plane would be brought to some airport governed by international law, and then quickly allowed to depart with its crew and its passengers. But that was not the scenario followed by the blackmailers who captured the Pan American, TWA and Swissair aircraft.

The complete failure of the major airlines to deal with the threat of hijacking is matched only by the impotence of the United States Government in protecting its planes and its citizens. Coming so soon after the Egyptian display of contempt for this country implicit in Cairo's wholesale violation of the standstill provisions of the Middle East cease-fire, the latest incidents must further convince Arab militants that the United States is a paper tiger. And the Israelis will naturally further question the worth of the promises of a country that is unable even to protect its own citizens and planes.

The crux of the problem posed by the Arab hijackings is that the terrorists involved are financed, armed and supported—openly or covertly—by the Arab states. Last July the hijackers of a Greek plane were received as heroes in Cairo. Last Sunday the hijacked Pan American 747 stopped in Beirut to take a commando explosives expert on board so that he could prepare the plane's destruction at Cairo. Yet no action has been taken to apply sanctions.

It is long past time for the airlines and governments of the world to declare a boycott of the Arab states, to refuse to let Arab planes land elsewhere in the world and to refuse to fly non-Arab planes to those countries until the hijackers have been made outlaws in the Arab lands. The failure to take such sanctions in the past has spurred the Arab terrorist campaign against peaceful air travel. Failure to impose sanctions now will mean that the major governments and airlines of the world are de facto accomplices of the fanatics who have endangered so many thousands of people in recent days and who intend to continue their potentially murderous crimes.