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Joe Brancatelli on Business Travel

Airlines Feared a 'Friendly Fire' Disaster; Have We Had Our First?

Joe Brancatelli

July 21, 1997

A day after the downing of TWA 800 last July, an executive of an international airline invited me to lunch. From the moment I slid into the banquette at his stodgy private club, I knew this was going to be a different kind of lunch altogether. "So what's your take on TWA 800?" the executive asked before I could settle in. The question stunned me. Over all the years I had known this guy, he never speculated on matters of safety or security, and once said sourly, "Never say 'crash' to an airline guy" when I jokingly asked about the "crash" of his company stock price. "Well," I stammered. "I mean, there's no 'good' news here. If it was a missile, there's gonna be hell to pay. If it was terrorism, the recriminations and the security measures will be positively fascist. And if it was mechanical, it was catastrophic failure like we've never seen before." - "It was a missile," the executive said evenly. "Friendly fire. We kept telling the military this would happen one day. And the bastards just kept doing it and doing it. And now hundreds of people are dead." I didn't say anything. We didn't even have water on the table yet and here was this wild accusation from an airline guy I considered Mr. Button Down. I took a quick mental inventory of what I knew about him: He was former military, his son was a TWA pilot, and we'd had a brief conversation a couple of months back when one of his airline's planes was chased by two military fighter jets across the North Pacific. "What are we talking about?" I finally managed to mumble. Grimly, the executive laid out his theory: TWA 800 took off, was picked up on radar by U.S. fighters, and then was made the "target" by a giddy pilot. As so often happens, this military pilot was playing an ad hoc war game: lock onto a commercial jet, make believe its an enemy plane, then blow it out of the sky. Only this time, the executive insisted, something went terribly wrong and the game turned real. "For years we've been complaining about the military locking onto commercial jets and using them for target practice," the executive said. "We go down to the Pentagon and bitch and they promise it'll never happen again. Then, when it does happen again, the brass says, 'no harm, no foul.' I think they just fouled." Over the course of this very peculiar lunch, the airline executive also laid out several eerie scenarios: Watch the government attempt to discredit, then ignore, then awkwardly explain away the eyewitness accounts that support the "missile theory." Watch the President make an unprecedented gesture to the families of the TWA 800 victims. Watch how the cockpit recorders will reveal no signs of crew comments indicating mechanical failure. Watch how a mechanical problem will be vaguely blamed, yet no 747s will be grounded. Most of all, he said, "Watch the players." - "What do you mean, 'Watch the players?'" - "Joe," he said, as if quizzing a befuddled child, "Who has the statutory authority to investigate air crashes in this country?" - "Well," I said, "The National Transportation Safety Board, except if..." - "Except if there is criminal activity involved and then the FBI is in the mix." - "So," I wondered, "What's the point?" - "Like I said, watch the players. Forget about what they say and what they do. Eventually, they will tell you its not a bomb, its not a missile, its a mechanical. But watch how the FBI doesn't go away. If its a mechanical, the FBI has no legal authority to be anywhere near the NTSB.

But watch how the FBI will never go away." I left that luncheon scared. I wondered how a right-thinking, by-the-book airline executive become a conspiracy freak. Except...Except how come no airline executive I know thinks this luncheon conversation was strange? How come, whenever I ask about TWA 800, they obsess about the number of times their aircraft have been "targets" of military jets playing war games? Except how come everything that airline executive predicted during that lunch has come true? The government has gone to extraordinary -sometimes laughable- lengths to discredit, ignore, then explain away eyewitness accounts. President Clinton and the First Lady did take the unprecedented step of flying to Kennedy Airport to console the families of the TWA 800 victims. They didn't fly to Detroit in January to comfort the families of the victims of the Comair crash and they didn't go to Florida to comfort the families of last year's ValuJet crash. How come the cockpit recorders didn't yield any clue of a mechanical failure? How come no 747s have been grounded if there really is a catastrophic problem with their center fuel tanks? And, how come, if you watch the players, the FBI is still intimately involved with the investigation more than a year out? Deputy FBI director James Kallstrom has shadowed the NTSB since the moment TWA 800 went down. He tells anyone who listens that there's no evidence of a bomb or a missile. Yet he told Congress as recently as July 10 the FBI will remain involved in what should otherwise be strictly NTSB business. Something is very wrong here, fellow travelers. Very wrong.

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