'The Skies Belong to Us,' by Brendan Koerner
The Skies Belong to Us
Love and Terror in the Golden Age of Hijacking
By Brendan I. Koerner
In his best-seller "The Skyjacker: His Flights of Fancy," published in 1971, Dallas psychiatrist David Hubbard concluded that the men who chose to commit this particular crime had been traumatized by violent, alcoholic fathers and excessively religious mothers. Seeking liberation from past humiliations, they fixated on flight: "Skyjackers seem intent to stand on their own feet, to be men, to face their God, and to arise from the planet to the other more pleasing place."

Skyjacking could be prevented, Hubbard insisted, by injecting nutritional supplements of manganese and zinc into the wombs of pregnant mothers to improve babies' equilibrium. He insisted that screening passengers was pointless, advised against FBI sniper attacks because they encouraged a "death wish" already present in skyjackers, and suggested that the government use more female astronauts to reduce associations between flight and machismo.

Between 1968 and 1973, at the height of Vietnam War protests, according to Brendan Koerner, a contributing editor at Wired magazine, airplane hijackings were surprisingly common occurrences; most of the time, the planes landed in Cuba, without fatalities to crew members or passengers. Airline executives, politicians and frequent fliers didn't know what to make of them. Time magazine, for example, published a humorous travel essay titled "What to Do When the Hijacker Comes," which opined that the phenomenon, "although unwelcome, can be congenial."

In "The Skies Belong to Us: Love and Terror in the Golden Age of Hijacking," Koerner captures the tenor of the times with a splendid and stylish tale of the commandeering of Western Airlines Flight 701 by Roger Holder, an emotionally disturbed AWOL U.S. Army veteran, and Cathy Kerkow, his girlfriend. The longest-distance hijacking in American history, the escapade involved black militants Angela Davis and Eldridge Cleaver and $500,000 in ransom money, and ended in Algiers, Algeria, a city Holder picked on impulse over Hanoi.

Koerner steps back from the narrative just long enough to demonstrate that authorities reacted slowly to hijacking, worrying more about who would pay for devices to enhance security than about passenger safety and civil liberties. In 1972, he indicates, when the Airline Passenger Screening Act, which required airlines to make every passenger pass through a metal detector,
reached the U.S. House of Representatives, airline lobbyists convinced lawmakers that universal electronic screening was not feasible.

A few months later, after a second plane landed in Algiers, Eastern Airlines ordered that all carry-on bags at LaGuardia Airport in New York pass through an X-ray machine. Although the company concluded that its new procedures had resulted in no flight delays, Eastern did not install the devices in other airports - and United and Pan Am insisted that they would do so only if the government paid the bill.

On Dec. 5, 1972, after hijackers almost sent Southern Airways Flight 49 into a nuclear plant in Tennessee, the Nixon administration ordered airports to screen every passenger with a metal detector, inspect the contents of carry-ons and station a local police officer or sheriff's deputy at the boarding gate at every one of the nation's 531 major commercial facilities. According to Koerner, only a small number of civil libertarians protested the decree. Nor were there any significant legal challenges to a ban on family members and friends accompanying loved ones to the boarding gate.

Meanwhile, Koerner points out, hijacking disappeared - for a while. Between 1991 and 2000, for example, not a single commercial flight in American airspace was diverted from its destination. Airlines paid for few personnel - and paid them a pittance. They did not update their policies, which continued to instruct crew members to cooperate fully with hijackers and to open a dialogue with officials on the ground to facilitate a peaceful resolution.
"No one in a position of authority," Koerner indicates, "fathomed a scenario in which hijackers would have no interest in using their hostages as bargaining chips."

Hijacking, of course, was about to change. These days, it is hard to imagine a would-be hijacker explaining to a potential confederate, as Roger Holder did to Cathy Kerkow, that he intended to take over a plane; order it flown to San Francisco, where half the passengers would be exchanged for Angela Davis, who would appear at the airport in a white dress; fly to Hanoi, where Prime Minister Pham Van Dong would offer her political asylum; and then continue on to Australia, where the couple would marry and live happily ever after. It is even harder to imagine Kerkow responding to his proposal with this question: "So, what do I wear to a hijacking?"

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