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EDITORIALS

Suicide A-Bombers Must Be Frustrated

Remember the good old days of airline hijackings? Hijackers would commandeer a plane, land at an airport of their choosing then bargain passengers' lives for concessions or publicity.

After 9/11, the hijack equation — including security measures — changed radically. Hijackers who have some hope of survival can seize a flying bargaining chip. Hijackers willing to commit suicide can create a low-tech guided missile and kill thousands.

Three and half years after 9/11, the good old days of nuclear weapon complex security are still with us, and the consequences could dwarf the World Trade Center attack.

Thanks to the kamikaze factor, it arguably would be easier to trigger an explosion rivaling the Hiroshima atomic bomb than it was to take out the Twin Towers.

That attack took some rudimentary flight training. Setting off an explosion requires only a strong back and a weak instinct for self-preservation.

All the high-tech engineering is for ensuring a weapon that would reliably destroy enemy targets without harming the people who assemble, transport or use it. Terrorists who are planning to vaporize themselves can resort to more low-tech means.

The tough part is getting to the weapons-grade stuff. But a well-trained, determined force could do it — has, in fact, done it at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Mock terrorists took over a lab facility and repelled lab security for more than long enough to make a crude weapon to detonate on site. The area of the lab in which the exercise took place is the weakest link in the nation's weapons complex. But security at 12 other sites is problematic and expensive.

The Project On Government Oversight advocates consolidating at seven sites all material that could be used to improvise fission bombs. That would save an estimated \$3 billion over three years — compare that to the projected \$2.7 billion saved over 20 years by the proposed closing of Cannon Air Force Base. The magnitude of savings alone makes it a good idea.

But reducing the opportunities for suicide A-bombers makes it an imperative.