

TUNNEL VISION/Randy Kennedy

You Looking at Me? Yes, but It's Part of a Plan to Fight Terrorism

On any given weekday, more than two million people ride the New York City subway and most of them try very hard not to look at one another.

As an act of sustained denial it is amazing to watch, especially when the person who is defiantly not looking is seated right across from another person who screams to be looked at: he is playing "Staying Alive" on a broken saxophone; he is clipping his fingernails onto the floor while arguing with Satan; he is wearing a suit and headdress made entirely from old plastic bags.

This is part of the problem that officials from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority had to confront over the last several months as they tried to come up with a way to use the subway's very weakness to protect it from a terrorist attack.

The weakness is that the subway is one of the most open "closed" systems in the world. You cannot enter unless you pay. But after paying, you can come in with almost anything you are able to lift, roll or drag, from a Gucci bag to a refrigerator box.

You are never asked for identification or ushered through a metal detector. No one ever wants to X-ray your bag or know whether it has been in your possession since you packed it.

But you are always surrounded by tens of thousands of other people, all of whom, presumably, want one thing much more urgently than they want the next train to come. They want to be safe.

And so subway officials needed a way to help these riders help one another, to enlist their eyes and ears in a common cause. Simply put, to make them start looking at one another, very carefully.

Last year, transit security officials traveled to Israel, where there is a lot of hard-earned experience in trying to keep mass transit safe from terrorism. When they returned, they sat down with an advertising agency, which came up with some ideas and fanned out around the subway to test them.

As Allen Kay, the chairman of the agency, Korey Kay & Partners, described the process, it sounded like a gentle domestic form of wartime interrogation, in which two dozen riders were recruited at Grand Central Terminal and other stations. They were taken to an undisclosed "research facility," he said, where they were exposed to different public service messages and then asked for their response.

"The way we saw the assignment was a kind of a loose-lips-sink-ships, circa 2003," Mr. Kay said. "The irony was that in World War II, the mes-



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Maisie Hill, left, and Angela Costanco, students, on an IRT train yesterday near the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's new poster asking travelers to report anything suspicious to the authorities.

sage was to keep your mouth shut. And now the message is, in the trains, don't."

One version that did not test well was, "Be Suspicious of Things That Look Suspicious." First, said Katherine N. Lapp, the M.T.A.'s executive director, there was simply the problem of syllables. "It's hard to say three times fast," she said.

But also, she added: "Some people might take offense to that. You never know what that means." Especially in the subway, she said, perhaps thinking of the man in the plastic-bag suit, "What is suspicious?"

Another version that fared poorly was, "If You See a Package Without a Person, Don't Keep It to Yourself." Again, it was not exactly catchy. It put too much emphasis, officials said, on packages, when they also wanted riders to watch for people trying to sneak into employee areas or to hide something.

Plus, there was the chance that the message could be interpreted at first glance as a simple admonition not to steal things left behind on the seats.

The winner — which coincidentally began appearing on posters in thousands of subway cars, buses and commuter trains just a week before the war in Iraq started — was actually the simplest and most abstract: "If You See Something, Say Something," with a police phone number beneath (either 1-888-NYC-SAFE or 1-866-MTA-TIPS).

In the eyes of transit security officials, the message had several virtues. It let riders know that the only really stupid call to the police was the one not made. It seemed to make riders feel that they were a powerful force for their own defense, but that professionals somewhere were also thinking about it.

And officials found that riders seemed to know instinctively what "something" meant, and that it did not mean just Mr. Plastic Bag Man or a lurking pickpocket.

"They were able to distinguish between what we were looking for," Ms. Lapp said, "as opposed to just your average kind of nut job, psychotic on the subway. I mean, there are a lot of suspicious-looking people."

Yesterday afternoon at the Atlantic Avenue complex in Brooklyn, Jacob Green, 22, said he understood exactly what "something" meant, having spent four years in Jerusalem, where people look at other people and at their things very carefully. The only problem here, he said, being crowded into a W train, is that it is a full-time job.

"So many people," he said as the door closed. "Too many people."

24-Hour Air Patrols Resuming Over New York

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land. If a plane refused to land, he said, "there would be direct communication with the military," allowing a nearby fighter jet to scramble to intercept the aircraft.

Other officials said it was unclear if the 24-hour New York patrols would continue after the Iraq hostilities end.

"It really depends on what the intelligence is showing us at the time," an official said.

The Department of Homeland Security said 50 of its pilots and other crew members had been assigned to the mission to give 24-hour coverage over New York. The department declined to say how many Black Hawk helicopters and Cessna Citation II jets were assigned to the mission. (In 2001, Kennedy and La Guardia aver-

Unarmed surveillance craft can call on fighter jets nearby.

aged a daily total of 1,800 flights of all types.)

When it formally took control this month of the Customs Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service and several other agencies, the new department also took over a large fleet of planes that had been assigned to the individual agencies.

The UH-60A Black Hawk helicopters assigned to the mission are considered the largest, most pow-

erful helicopters used by federal law enforcement agencies. Each of the 20,000-pound helicopters is outfitted with special infrared detection equipment.

Senior officials said that since the patrols resumed over Washington, several stray planes have been intercepted while flying toward landmarks in the capital; a small plane was intercepted today by an F-16 fighter and was forced to land outside Washington.

Officials said pilots involved in the New York patrols would be supplied with detailed, minute-by-minute readings from the Air and Marine Interdiction Coordination Center in Riverside, Calif., a special government facility that receives live radar data from around the country and can quickly detect unauthorized flights into restricted airspace over New York and Washington.