An open technological society is not inherently vulnerable to terror. What its citizens know, and their willingness to judge and act are formidable natural defenses.

We suppress these instinctive defenses by advising airline passengers not to resist hijackers and pedestrians to yield to muggers' threats. Public safety briefings say that rational submission, not resistance, saves lives, avoiding in-flight shootouts and plane crashes. Resisting is unsafe, the thought is even foolish.

But is it?

Hijackers and muggers play on the bias against resistance. Safe in the knowledge of passive response, criminals can act with impunity.

In the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, many proposals are on the table to enhance security: Better airport screenings, more prohibitions, electronic surveillance, armed guards on airplanes. And there are questions about whether security in a high-tech society is fundamentally incompatible with privacy and civil liberties.

Yet sacrificing civil liberties and openness means giving up our way of life. Changing the social norm from passivity toward individual responsibility and action will enhance it.

Austrian Nobel laureate Friedrich A. Hayek wrote that information is inherently dispersed among members of society. The efficiency of the markets arises from individuals acting on their private information. The American republic was founded on the principle that the wisdom to choose leaders lies dispersed in the citizenry. Why is it that we do not trust ourselves to take the right action individually in circumstances when no government or organization can match our information and act on it?

Surrendering our liberties to intrusive monitoring and accepting the burdens of distrust at more steps in our lives is not the only defense against terror. We can also reexamine our reasons for immobilizing the only robust defense an open society has against such intrusions. America's founding fathers knew that. Citizen's arrest has a basis in both statutory and common law going back to medieval England.

With individual responsibility, education in vigilance and resistance, and a small additional risk, we can take back the skies and the streets. Criminals would know that there is good chance that someone will resist them. This is achievable without relaxing gun control or giving vigilantes a free run.

Apparently a small group of passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 chose to fight rather than submit. The result was a crash in open fields instead of another populated target.

Suicide bombers succeed in imposing the disastrous consequences of Sept. 11 at least in part because they are attacking...
a society that values individual safety above all.

Had the hijackers known that the people on the plane might fight, not submit, they may not have dared.

Shyam Sunder is a professor at the Yale School of Management.