

Security Theater

11/23/2010 by Dubbs Galt



"They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." – Benjamin Franklin, 1775

The holiday season is upon us. Over the next month, millions will be traveling to share this special time of year with friends and relatives. Many of us will elect to make the journey via airplane. For those who are accustomed to traveling, we have come to expect the various inconveniences of the airport – waiting in slow-moving security lines, removing shoes, packing liquids and gels in a quart-size bag, etc.

But recently, a host of new “inconveniences” introduced by TSA have been causing quite a stir in the news. Some travelers have become upset with being forced to give up your 4th Amendment rights, being subjected to controversial naked body scanners, and being groped by (always professional) TSA agents.

A [retired special education teacher was left humiliated, crying, and covered with his own urine](#) after a TSA officer carelessly (after being warned of the gentleman’s medical condition) broke the seal of his urostomy bag during an enhanced pat-down.

Another man was thrown out of San Diego International Airport and threatened with a lawsuit and a \$10,000 fine after he told a TSA agent, ["You touch my junk and I'm going to have you arrested."](#)

Once passengers have been selected for the enhanced searches, they cannot opt out of both the scan and the pat-down. [Even if someone in a security line becomes frustrated and decides not to fly, if they then try to evade the measures, they could face an \\$11,000 fine.](#)

The enhanced TSA screening procedures carry with them [health concerns](#) and [privacy concerns](#), but defenders of the government policy insist these measures are necessary for our own safety.

"Nobody likes having their Fourth Amendment [rights] violated going through a security line, but the

truth of the matter is we are going to have to do it.” - [Mo McGowan – Former Director of TSA Security Operations](#)

The government’s only legitimate purpose is to protect our rights. How these bureaucrats justify efforts to protect our rights by violating our rights is beyond me.

But do more invasive TSA security measures even translate to more actual security?

I concede that TSA is really good at matching your boarding pass (you print at home and can easily alter) to your ID (you can easily obtain a realistic looking fake). And TSA is pretty good at monitoring that your liquids fit in a quart-size bag (until I go through security every time with a 1 fl oz bottle of eye drops in my pocket just to test them – they fail every time).

But the success record of TSA really breaks down when it comes to identifying and stopping real threats. A recent TSA report shows screeners at Los Angeles International Airport missed about [75% of simulated explosives and bomb parts](#) that TSA testers hid under their clothes or in carry-on bags.

In my personal experience, TSA has let me through with a butter knife I had left in my computer bag for my morning bagel. A friend made it through TSA security and onto the plane with a full can of pepper spray he had accidentally left in his baby stroller. Bag screeners routinely fail to detect guns, knives, and other weapons. It is safe to say that TSA is not doing its job to make us safe at all.

In its nine years of existence, TSA has not once caught a terrorist during a preflight screening.

But surely the new TSA’s enhanced screening procedures make us safer?

Well, maybe not. In addition to the health concerns and privacy concerns, there is significant [evidence](#) to suggest the new machines don’t even work all that well.

The traditional magnetometers used today can detect high-density objects such as guns and knives, but according to a report from the Government Accountability Office, the naked body scanners fared poorly against [“...low-density materials such as thin plastics, gels and liquids. Care to guess what Abdulmutallab's bomb was made of?”](#)

Additionally, as Bruce Schneier, internationally renowned security technologist noted during a test, [“The scanner caught a subject's cell phone and Swiss Army knife -- and the microphone he was wearing -- but missed all the components to make a bomb that he hid on his body... Full-body scanners: they're not just a dumb idea, they don't actually work.”](#)

But if there are health concerns, privacy concerns, and the new scanning technology doesn’t even work...Why did we spend [\\$300 million of stimulus money](#) to buy the naked body scanners? And why are we spending [\\$340 million each year](#), including hiring an additional [5,000 TSA employees](#) to operate the

new machines?

One possible explanation could be that the executives of the companies that produce the naked body scanners are mostly former Homeland Security officials. [Michael Chertoff, former head of the TSA, is now selling the scanning equipment to the TSA.](#)

Another related explanation is that the enhanced screening procedures (and the TSA itself) are a classic example of Security Theater intended to provide the feeling of improved security while doing little or nothing to actually improve it. Security Theater usual involves a very visible pretense of security and control. It can be something negligible (such as forbidding the passage of a 6 oz bottle of water though security but allowing a box of frozen vegetables). Or, Security Theater can involve a much greater suggested or actual threat to personal liberty (such as guards with machine guns or TSA agents with rubber gloves and pictures of you in your birthday suit).

Security Theater also needs new gimmicks and updated procedures so the public believes the authorities actually have the situation under control. I am confident the new naked body scanners will be a failure just like the recently scrapped multimillion dollar “air puff” bomb detection system the TSA implemented in U.S. airports. The “air puff” bomb detectors turned out to be both inaccurate and unreliable.

All in all the [TSA is a costly failure.](#) With TSA we have increasing invasiveness, decreasing airline customer satisfaction, increasing costs, and decreasing actual security. These are all simply the manifested symptoms of a more fundamental problem. It is that problem I would now like to address.



The Root of the TSA Problem

Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, both Republicans and Democrats in Congress urged the creation of a new government agency which they claimed to be absolutely essential to maintaining national security, as well as, ensuring the safety of airplane passengers. The Senate voted 100 – 0 to form the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to “...protect the nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce.”

Apparently the government's previous attempts at providing security were insufficient. In addition to the FBI, CIA, NSA, Customs, Air Marshals, and Police...Congress decided we needed to create a new protection agency that costs billions of dollars and employs over 50,000 new government bureaucrats. The political mentality regarding airport security might have been summarized best by Senator Tom Daschle when he infamously said, ["You can't professionalize if you don't federalize!"](#)

Senator Daschle, aware or not, cut right to the core of the issue. I am probably correct to assume the Senator, like most all politicians, truly believes that a society cannot exist "professionally" without a centralized authority directing our every step in all areas of life. However, I'll limit the scope of the current analysis to the TSA and its protection function.

Implicit in Senator Daschle's statement is the assumption that central control by the federal government is required to efficiently and effectively provide the service of "protection" to the people. It is all too readily assumed (by most people) that the free market, though great for satisfying the wants and needs of consumers in other areas, is somehow inept when it comes to providing solutions in the realm of safety and defense. This is a grave misconception. For the same reasons that socialism fails to effectively solve any economic problem, socialized airport security also fails to deliver effective security.

Government Security vs. Free Market Security

It grows tiresome having to defend the merits of the free market, especially to those who claim it is "utopian". It is far more utopian to take the position that government can efficiently and effectively satisfy the needs and wants of consumers better than the market in any area – including safety, protection, and defense. It is utter nonsense. However, the TSA debacle is another perfect example of government failure, so I will use this opportunity to explain the nature of the problem with which we are dealing.

Achieving a 100% safe environment is not possible. Whether or not we are talking about government security or privatized security, we have to balance a desired level of security with satisfying other wants and needs – such as being allowed to leave the house. Luckily, the question is not an all or nothing: *"Do we want 100% security or do we want no security at all?"* Rather, the real question is: *"How do we maximize the benefits of providing desired airport security at an acceptable level of incurred cost."* In other words, what tradeoffs are we willing to accept?

This is where it starts to get interesting. If the fundamental question is *"what tradeoffs are we willing to accept"*, the next logical question is *"who decides what tradeoffs are acceptable?"*

Some people may prefer to pay less money or wait in shorter lines in exchange for increased risk. Other people may prefer to undergo a full body cavity search if it means an increased level of safety or pay more money if it means reduced risk. People balance cost, risk, and safety everyday with decisions they make regarding everything from what kind of car they drive to what kind of food they eat. People have different preferences. But is it the government's role to decide what our preferences should be?

Besides, can the government better satisfy consumer preferences than the market?

An article in the Freeman suggests we, [“Free the airlines from the federal government’s stranglehold on security. Let each company determine what works best for its routes, customers, and specific risks. Does anyone seriously believe that politicians and bureaucrats know more about securing planes than pilots and executives who’ve spent their lives in the industry?”](#)

Life is about solving problems and the free market has demonstrated time and time again that it is the best known system for creating solutions to the problems that confront human beings. It does not claim to generate perfect results, but it is the only political and economic system that allows for continual progress and promotes incremental increases in the degree of human flourishing. One of the wonderful conditions of human life is the freedom to choose how we live. Individually, we get to experience the rewards and responsibilities that come along with our choices.

Many people are conditioned to believe that government can provide what is best for the people, but it never does. It never has. Not only is this truly utopian fantasy of social engineering in direct conflict with sound economics, it is in direct conflict with the empirical evidence of all human history. I challenge you to think of a single instance where government encroachment into the marketplace has satisfied the wants and needs of the people more than the individual people would produce if left unhampered to engage in voluntary exchange. The situation becomes especially utopian when the socialist proponents think that central planners, armed with good intentions, know best what the wants and needs of the people *should* be.

In a free market, customers and airlines vote with their money to determine what kind of security procedures work best to meet their needs. This tends to produce results that satisfy the needs of the people. In a government run system, the customer has no vote. This tends to produce results that satisfy the needs of the government.

Proponents of government intervention want to remove the locus of decision making from the individual and place it in the hands of the all-knowing bureaucrat. They want to force a one-size-fits-all system on a population that has very different preferences. If a bureaucrat can tell you how much security you must accept and pay for, there is no reason they should also not be allowed to dictate what kind of food you eat, what kind of books you read, or what type of religious service you attend. Are adults capable of making their own decisions or do we need a nanny-state holding our hand and looking over our shoulder?

At this point, I’m sure some people are thinking that issues of safety and protection are fundamentally different than food and books. Perhaps in many regards they are, but not when it comes to the fundamental economic laws of human action. In August, [AmericanlyYours published a great article on market solutions for the provision of police and fire services.](#) I urge you to read it. The article addresses the standard arguments used to justify government provision of protection services and outlines how these services might be better provided in the free market. Similar principles apply to the

provision of airport security.

When government fails in its duties, it expands its reach. Our government didn't prevent 9/11, yet they want to expand their oversight powers and expect us to follow them blindly. The security failure that resulted in the 9/11 attacks was a result of ineffective federal regulations. Security screeners (though private contractors) were operating in accordance with the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) guidance which permitted box cutters aboard planes. These small knives were not in violation of government rules and neither were unlocked cockpit doors. According to Becky Akers, ["Had each airline set its own policies, had it relied on serious security rather than the charade that satisfies political pretenses, 3,000 people might be alive today."](#)

TSA is the perfect example of government program that doesn't have to answer to customers. If the naked body scanners and full-body groping really were good ideas, we would probably see these practices implemented at schools, shopping malls, and sporting events. (Don't get any ideas government. I'm not saying it is a good idea.)

The government has control over the present good of force and doesn't have any long term incentive to satisfy consumer preference. What we get is another government agency that costs the nation billions of dollars in real expense (plus the expense of unforeseen solutions that might have evolved in the unhampered market).

The TSA is no different than any other government program. What we are told is that the government is graciously stepping in to save us from another failure of the free market. In reality, some other government regulation caused the problem in the first place, and what we get as a fix is another unaccountable government agency mired in bureaucracy, inefficiency, and waste. The TSA undermines the protection of the nation's transportation systems while it encroaches on people's basic freedoms. **It should be abolished and the airport security should be 100% privatized for the moral and economic reasons stated above.**

But then again, would it be possible to feel safe without Security Theater? The show must go on!

Happy Thanksgiving!

Be advised - You may experience significant delays at the airport if you are traveling on Wednesday, 11/24/2010. It is ["National Opt-Out" Day](#). People are trying to organize a massive protest of the new TSA procedures by electing to "opt-out" of the scanner and submit to the full-body pat down in hopes of crippling TSA resources on one of the busiest travel days of the year.

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