

The TSA Is Keeping the Skies Safe

Body scans and intrusive searches are unpleasant but necessary.

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OPINION

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Since 9/11, al Qaeda has not succeeded in launching another terrorist spectacular in the United States. But it has succeeded in provoking a spectacular debate about aviation security. Several weeks ago—and even earlier at some airports—the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) initiated full-body scans and enhanced pat-downs, including inspections of private parts, that in some quarters are fueling outrage. So is the flying public rightly angered? The media have documented a string of monstrous cases in which prosthetic breasts have been exposed and urostomy bags worn by bladder-cancer patients have been disconnected, with humiliating consequences.

These incidents certainly demand better training for security personnel. But they do not invalidate the need for intrusive screening.

Our adversaries have proved to be highly adaptive in their methods and unswerving in their efforts to bring down a large aircraft. It was inadequate screening in 2001 that allowed Richard Reid to board a flight from Paris to Miami with a bomb made of C-4 plastic explosives in his shoe. And it was insufficiently intrusive screening that last December enabled Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to board a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit with a bomb made of PETN in his underwear—which of course is why our underwear is now being searched.

True, both men might have been caught by intelligence revealing their ties to Islamic radicals, but intelligence is hardly foolproof. It can fail—and frequently does fail—to connect the dots. Screening at the gate, even if it too is sometimes unsuccessful, can offer a last chance to avert catastrophe. Some argue that racial and religious profiling would obviate the need for screening and allow us to stop wasting time and resources searching grandmothers and infants. But the recent record suggests that making exceptions is not as easy or wise as it might seem.

In July, Zachary Adam Chesser, a 20-year-old white male Muslim convert from the suburbs of Washington, D.C., was prevented from boarding a flight from New York to Uganda where he planned to join up with the Somali Muslim radical group al Shabaab. Hoping to avoid scrutiny, Chesser brought along his infant son. Some Palestinian groups, including Islamic Jihad and Hamas, have recruited children as young as 11 to smuggle explosives.

The dilemma is obvious. If the TSA makes a visible hole in its screening procedures, whether for infants or for seniors, it will be only a matter of time before our pitiless adversaries—who closely observe our methods—fill the hole with lethal results.

Some charge that the TSA is engaged in "security theater," designed to make us feel safe at the expense of genuine safety. But it is simply not true that a TSA unshackled from political correctness could pick out likely terrorists from the screening line and let everyone else sail through. For starters, religious profiling raises an obvious question: How does one tell who worships how, where and what? Neither American nor foreign travelers carry identity cards that reveal their religion. True, some passengers might wear Islamic garb. But Mohammed Atta and his fellow 9/11 terrorists certainly did not, and neither have any of their aspiring follow-on attackers. Al Qaeda is not stupid.

As for screening by race, one is left wondering what criteria would be used. Is Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer right when he says the profile of the airline attacker is "narrow, concrete, uniquely definable and universally known"?

Some terrorists, like Chesser, are clearly white. Some, like Abdulmutallab, are black. Jose Padilla, who contemplated setting off a dirty bomb in the U.S., is Hispanic. Colleen Renee LaRose, aka Jihad Jane, is female, blond and blue-eyed. As former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff noted at an Intelligence Squared debate earlier this week in New York City, by focusing exclusively on individuals of Middle Eastern appearance, racial profiling is both "over-inclusive and under-inclusive" at once.

Aviation security is a technical issue. The attempt to turn it into a political one, with charges of political correctness, has dangers of its own. If our security officials do not enjoy public support for measures—unpleasant though they may be—to keep the skies safe, we risk increasing the chances of a deadly lapse in a system with a remarkably impressive record over nine years.

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