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FORUM

SEND TRANSPORTATION CHIEF A TICKET HOME

Richard W. Rahn

Norman Mineta should be removed as Secretary of Transportation because he is contravening the mission of his Department, encouraging a systematic abuse of the American people that violates their basic rights, and using his staff in an attempt to silence his legitimate critics.

U.S. Airways just announced filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, joining Vanguard and Midway Airlines. There is speculation that United Airlines and others will follow. Much of the distress in the airline industry can be directly traced to the policies of the Transportation Department which, contrary to its own mission statement, is engaged in activities that discourage people from flying.

As a frequent flyer, I see unnecessary and uncivil abuse by airport security personnel on a daily basis. I have seen elderly ladies harassed and small children brought to tears by what can only fairly be called sadistic and totally improper behavior by people working directly or indirectly for the Transportation Department. Virtually every day, the papers document outrageous behavior by so-called airport security personnel, such as insisting that travelers expose medical implants, etc. Such behavior does nothing to protect us from terrorists, but only undermines respect for the law and civil society.

Secretary Mineta appeared on "60 Minutes" where he seemed to not only condone but to encourage harassment of totally innocent individuals. He claimed that to make any distinction between a young Arab man and a little old grandmother would be racist, but the failure to make such obvious empirically based distinctions is nothing more than vile discrimination against the old, children, and the weak. Why should these totally innocent people who are obviously not part of any group that is going to threaten anyone be forced to stand in long lines, and have their property and person violated in a public and intimidating manner?

If a criminal gang was known to be exclusively made up of young white men with blond hair and blue eyes, and if the police then stopped black people (or little old ladies or Americans of Asian heritage) and subjected them to harassment and body searches knowing full well that the chance of any of these people being part of the "gang" was virtually nil, everyone (including, I expect, the secretary) would scream racism for good reason, and the practice would stop immediately.

The secretary knows there is at least 1,000 times greater chance that a young Arab male is going to try to commit a terrorist act than a 70-year-old black or white lady. Knowing this, the responsible thing to do is 1,000 times more body checks on young Arab males than on older women. To correctly claim that only a very small portion of Arab males are terrorists is no excuse for going after old women. To do so is abusive, sexist, mean-spirited, and senseless.

Critics will say it is possible that 80-year old women could be terrorists, and hence they need to be checked. However, the probability of that occurring is extremely small, and to spend time and money patting them down wastes scarce resources better spent focusing on more likely suspects. After going through airport security checks, one gets the distinct impression that there is no one in the Transportation Department who understands basic cost-benefit analysis or has any appreciation for human liberty and dignity. We could be much safer, at a lower cost, while keeping our liberty and dignity in tact, if the department focused on those who present a clear and present danger.

The secretary, being of Japanese descent, was subjected to outrageous and inexcusable behavior during W.W.II when he and his family were put in an internment camp. But that is no justification for him and his colleagues to treat equally innocent Americans in an abusive manner now. If anything, he should be more compassionate, not vengeful.

As a result of the current policies, the public is discouraged from flying, and this is adversely affecting the bottom line of the airlines and driving some into bankruptcy. It is not only the shareholders and workers who suffer the loss, but the reduction in airline service hurts all Americans. Over the past year, there have been hundreds of columns, including several of my own, about abusive and counterproductive airline security procedures, but Mineta refuses to take corrective action.

On August 6, the very distinguished philosopher, historian, and world-renowned concert pianist, Balint Vazsonyi, wrote in his syndicated column in the Washington Times about the inexcusable behavior of Transportation Department personnel regarding airline security. In response to the column, one of Mr. Mineta's minions, Chet Lunner, wrote a letter to The Times personally attacking Mr. Vazsonyi. Mr. Lunner referred to him as a "Hungarian-born piano player." The fact is that Mr. Vazsonyi first suffered under the Nazis and then the communists in his native Hungary before escaping to this country. In part, because of his own experience with totalitarianism, he has been an extraordinary voice for liberty. Mr. Lunner of the Transportation Department, as part of his slur against Mr. Vazsonyi, claimed Mr. Vazsonyi had no "moral right" to bring the secretary to account for what many of us sincerely believe is immoral behavior. It is troubling that a federal government employee would write an official letter to an American newspaper attacking an American citizen for telling the truth about a rogue government agency, which is reminiscent of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

Norman Mineta had a distinguished career. But, as he has obtained more power, he has gone from a protector of liberty and economic vitality to a destroyer of a key part

of our economy, as well as the liberties of many Americans. Because of his past accomplishments, the administration has tolerated him too long. He should go.

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