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Confusing control and security

By Richard W. Rahn
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Suppose you were a sadist and really hated your fellow men -- what type of job would you try to get? Well, you might try to become head of airline security for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), where you could devise a system like the following.

You would:

• Hire people who are wannabee drill instructors, to order passengers around as if they were new Marine Corps recruits.

• Demand passengers show their IDs up to four times before boarding, even though you know IDs are easily forged.

• Require people to wait in long lines, even though you know almost precisely how many people will travel through each airport each hour.

• Force people confined to wheelchairs or who have implants or pacemakers to go through unnecessarily lengthy, degrading, embarrassing and intrusive physical inspections.

• Take away relatively harmless personal items, such as tweezers, hat pins, sewing scissors, etc., while leaving people with items that are much more lethal in trained hands.

• Harass small children, elderly women, infirm individuals, and young attractive women by making them go through difficult body motions and inappropriate touching.

• And finally, waste taxpayer monies by hiring excessive personnel to ask the same questions over and over or allow them to hang around doing nothing.

You would think, of course, what is described above could not possibly occur in a society that calls itself free and democratic, but unfortunately every day millions of Americans are subject to some or all of the above if they try to fly.

People are being unnecessarily abused by agents of their government because those charged with our security all too often fail to distinguish between security and control,

fail to use basic cost-benefit analysis when designing systems and procedures, and are ignorant or insensitive to civil liberties.

As a frequent flyer, I find most TSA personnel polite, but I also see far too many who seem to enjoy abusing their fellow citizens. Airlines often have a legitimate need to know who is flying on their planes to account for their frequent flyer and other discount programs. However, in a free society, the government should not monitor innocent citizens' movements and require them to provide IDs.

Yes, the government may want to track criminals and terrorists, but all IDs now required are easily forged, and remember, the September 11, 2001, terrorists all had IDs. (Even the new high tech IDs are being forged in dorms on many college campuses. In fact, one of the world's leading experts on security and encryption, Bruce Schneier, has argued IDs are "not only a waste of money" but may, in fact, exacerbate crime.) Being required to show an ID won't deter a committed terrorist but is unnecessary harasses innocent passengers.

The TSA tell you to show up two hours early because their security lines might be very long. However, TSA management knows almost precisely at any given airport at any given hour how many passengers will show up. If they so desired, they could have enough security gates and personnel so 90 percent of all passengers need not wait more than five minutes. If 2000 people must wait an average of 30 minutes to go through security and if the average value of their time is $10 per hour, the cost of people standing in the security line is $10,000. The cost of additional security stations to greatly shorten queuing times is far less than the passengers' time costs.

When I am on an airplane, I am not concerned that the man next to me may have a Swiss Army knife in his pocket, but I am concerned that someone might have brought a chemical bomb on board or in the cargo hold. TSA steal our small metal objects because they can easily find them with metal detectors. However, they ignore equally or more dangerous objects -- in trained hands -- made of plastic or other materials that are not easily detected or are too personal (e.g., belts and bra straps).

If TSA would use sensible cost-benefit and probability analysis, they would put more resources into bomb and chemical detection and let us have our pocket knives and sewing materials. But, like the French, they prefer to fight the last war. (They seem to forget that for decades before the recent use of metal detectors many people routinely carried guns on airplanes, and despite millions of flights there were only a handful of serious incidents.)

TSA, and for that matter all other law enforcement agencies, should be required to subject every rule, regulation and procedure to strict cost-benefit analysis, as well as review by civil liberties experts. That would provide better security at lower cost, with far less harassment and intrusion.

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