

The TSA and Security Theater: Understanding American Airport Security Following 9/11

Following the attacks of September 11th, Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA), creating the Transportation Security Agency (TSA). The TSA replaced private security screening companies with one government agency. Since then, air travelers have bowed to pat downs, bans on water bottles and other inconvenient, intrusive procedures as the “new normal” at our nation’s airports. But does any of this make us safer?

Security Theater and the TSA

Security expert Bruce Schneier coined the term “security theater” to describe some of the TSA’s procedures and screening practices. Security theater provides the appearance of enhanced security without actually making anyone more secure.

Since 9/11, the TSA has implemented new screening procedures on an almost constant basis. The structural problem with these new screening procedures is two-fold. First, these procedures are almost always in response to past threats, not in anticipation of future threats. Second, average Americans suffer the consequences for years to come in the form of ever-increasing screening procedures and lost time.

Sadly, the TSA’s accumulated procedures and screening practices are actually causing more American deaths. Cornell University researchers found decreased air travel after 9/11 led to an extra 242 road fatalities per month. In all, the researchers estimate that 1,200 people died as a result of decreased air travel. In 2007, the Cornell researchers studied TSA screening procedures implemented in 2002, and found that they decreased air travel by 6% – leading to an additional 129 road fatalities in the last three months of 2002. In terms of casualties, that’s the same as blowing up a fully loaded Boeing 737.

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