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The Unrecognized Cost of Aviation Security

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The Aviation and Transportation Security Act, passed in November 2001, mandated that, within one year, all aviation-security functions (primarily airline-passenger and baggage screening) be performed by employees of a newly created Transportation Security Administration [TSA]. Initially a component of the U.S. Department of Transportation, as TSA is becoming fully operational it has been transferred to the just-established Department of Homeland Security (or, for those with nostalgia for Germany in the 1930s, *das Abteilung der Heimatsicherheit*).

With authorized full-time-equivalent employment of 45,000 and a proposed FY 2003 budget of \$4.8 billion, the TSA is a nontrivial operation. However, this largely represents a transfer of security functions from the private sector (airports, airlines and their contractors) to the federal government. Ironically, this transfer *to* government has occurred just as the Bush administration was mandating significant outsourcing and privatization of other governmental functions. Notably, neither Congress nor the Bush administration has offered any evidence that an appropriately-guided private system could not perform at least as effectively but at lower cost.

While the federal security system may (or may not) be more effective than the private system it replaced, it will certainly be significantly more expensive. The increase in cost is only hinted at by the fact that TSA screening personnel are more grandiosely decked out than their private predecessors; TSA uniforms remind one of Richard Nixon's attempt to garb White House security officers in uniforms comparable to those of Louis XIVth's courtiers or the Pope's Swiss guards.

If one can question whether and to what degree air travel will be safer as a result of security federalization, what cannot be questioned is the imposition on passengers of more extensive, rigorous and unpleasant security procedures. As a result of these new procedures passengers are arriving at airports more than an hour earlier than previously. And the passengers' experience is more unpleasant and demeaning, especially for those subjected to particularly intrusive scrutiny after designation as "selectees," a dubious distinction which appears to be disproportionately awarded to grandmothers and pregnant women.

In 1999, the last year for which data are available, scheduled airlines enplaned 635.4 million revenue passengers.¹ If heightened security demands an additional hour of each passenger, then passenger time absorbed by enhanced security screening totals 72,500 years per year. Conservatively valuing passenger time at mean earnings of about \$35,000 per year, heightened aviation security is costing passengers more than \$2.5 billion per year.²

Of course, cost alone is not the issue. What benefit is the public gaining from more rigorous security procedures? Congress and the Bush administration claim that we are safer, but they have offered no mean-

1 U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001, Table No. 1057. The revenue-passenger count understates the total number of people inconvenienced by the new procedures, because it excludes, e.g., persons accompanying passengers requiring assistance and air-taxi and other civil-aviation passengers boarding from secured areas.

2 Because airline passengers tend to be more affluent than the general population, mean earnings provides a downward-biased estimate of the value of passenger time.

ingful evidence. Plausibly, such evidence would be in the form of lives which would have been lost in the absence of enhanced security.³

How many lives would have to be saved each year to justify 72,500 years of passenger time lost to enhanced security screening? Assume (again conservatively) that the representative person killed in an airline crash is 35 years old, with an expectation of an additional 43.5 years of life.⁴ Then, an average of 1,667 lives would have to be saved annually just to cover the passenger-time cost of enhanced security.

This calculation assumes that passenger time spent in security screening is simply lost, i.e., is of no net value, positive or negative, to the passenger; this neutral passenger would willingly devote an hour to screening if the enhanced safety lengthened his life expectancy by at least one hour. In fact, for most passengers the situation is worse. To be the object of security screening is positively distasteful. If an hour spent in screening is worse than an hour spent dead, one would voluntarily suffer the screening experience only if enhanced security increased life expectancy by more than one hour. For example, if the representative passenger found screening so distasteful that he would give up two hours of life to avoid one hour of security screening, then the new security procedures would be justified only if they resulted in the saving of 3,333 lives each year. Note that this is approximately the number of people killed at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, i.e., a 9/11 event would have to be avoided each year in order to justify enhanced aviation security.

When alternatives, such as inaccessible cockpits, are readily available which would unambiguously (and comparatively cheaply) improve security, one can only conclude that Congress and the Bush administration have imposed TSA on the flying public only to condition the citizenry to comply with intrusive exercises of arbitrary federal power and to impress the gullible with their ostensible concern for public welfare.

3 In principle, avoided injuries should also be considered. However, because the primary consequence of an airline crash is death, injuries are ignored. Property damage is also ignored, although, as in the case of the World Trade Center, it may be nontrivial.

4 U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001, Table No. 98.