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Should America privatize the TSA?

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Why not let airports, rather than the TSA, handle airport security? (CRAIG F. WALKER / AP)

Any American who travels deals with the Transportation Safety Administration. The Bush administration made many mistakes in dealing with 9/11. Creating a government monopoly to handle transportation safety was one of the worst.

Government's most important duty is protecting its citizens. But even then the state need not hold a monopoly. There are police. However, the Second Amendment also ensures that Americans can protect themselves.

Obviously, Uncle Sam has an interest in transportation safety. But no airport or airline wants a plane hijacking. And no airline (or railroad) passenger wants to die in a terrorist incident.

Unfortunately, TSA is a costly behemoth better at bureaucracy than safety. In the aftermath of the 9/11 killings the Bush administration and Congress felt they had to do something, so in 2001 they created the TSA.

The following year the agency was transferred, along with pieces of 21 other agencies, to the new Department of Homeland Security. In 2013 TSA spent \$7.9 *billion* and employed 62,000 employees.

TSA's main job is to protect the more than 450 commercial airports, though railways, transit systems, highways, and even pipelines also are on its list. Two-thirds of the agency's budget goes for airport screenings.

Unfortunately, as my Cato Institute colleague Chris Edwards has documented in a new study on the agency, TSA has lived down to expectations.

Noted Edwards: "TSA has often made the news for its poor performance and for abusing the civil liberties of airline passengers. It has had a troubled workforce and has made numerous dubious investments." For all the agency's spending and effort, "TSA's screening performance has been no better, and possibly worse, than the performance of the remaining private screeners at U.S. airports."

TSA has had wasteful spending, "unethical and possibly illegal activities," according to the agency Inspector General, and "costly, counterintuitive, and poorly executed" operations, according to the House oversight committee.

Worst, though, is TSA's failure to do the job for which it was created: secure America's airports and other transportation hubs. Reported Edwards, "There were 25,000 security breaches at U.S. airports during TSA's first decade, despite the agency's huge spending and all the inconveniences imposed on passengers." In tests the agency failed to catch as much as three-quarters of fake explosives. Expensive, hi-tech machines were purchased and then abandoned.

The problem is not just operational inefficiency. TSA doesn't think strategically, or at least, do so effectively. Critiques of the agency range from harsh to scathing. TSA is "too reactive and always finds itself fighting the last war." The agency has overspent and created congestion, impeding security. DHS "implements most of its programs with little or no evaluation of their performance."

No planes have been hijacked since 9/11, but that isn't necessarily due to agency vigilance. Wrote Edwards: "The safety of travelers in recent years may have more to do with the dearth of terrorists in the United States and other security layers around aviation, than with the performance of TSA airport screeners."

The alternative to the TSA monopoly is privatization. Entrust airport security to airports, which can integrate screening with other aspects of facility security and adjust to local circumstances. It's not a leap into the unknown. Noted Edwards: "More than 80 percent of Europe's commercial airports use private screening companies, including those in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain."

Even the 2001 legislation setting up TSA allowed a small out for American airports. Five were allowed to go private, and another 11 have chosen to do so in the intervening 12 years. However, the Reason Foundation's Robert Poole complained that TSA "micromanages" even private operations, "thereby making it very difficult for screening companies to innovate." Worse, a House oversight committee charged the agency with "a history of intimidating airport operators that express an interest in" effectively firing TSA.

Obviously, dangers remain. But the best way to protect people would be to abolish TSA, limiting Washington to general oversight and tasks such as intelligence activities. Travel would be safer, security would be cheaper, and Americans would be freer.